

Tailor-made **Far East**

China | Japan | South Korea | Taiwan | Mongolia | Central Asia

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Welcome to TransIndus

It seems barely a week goes by without some programme about the Far East dominating the airwaves these days. Michael Wood's dazzling overview of Chinese history, live coverage of the New Year celebrations from Harbin and Hong Kong, and a fabulous series from the BBC on China's wildlife have all served to remind us how diverse this part of the world is, and what great potential it holds for travellers. Which is why we at TransIndus felt it high time we join the fray and bring our brochure for the region up to date, showcasing some of the new and exciting destinations that have opened up since we published our last one.

To which end, we've spent the past few months setting down accounts of the places we've found most compelling in our own recent travels, and searching for photographs to do them justice. The result, as we hope you'll agree, is something to savour. Whether you're a first-time visitor or an old hand, the following pages are sure to introduce you to sights you'll dream of travelling to, amazing landscapes you'll want to experience for yourself and people whose ways of life will challenge your notions of 'normal'!

For in spite of all their modernity, the societies of the Far East remain profoundly different from our own, in many and unexpected ways. I'll never forget the first time I visited a market in Sichuan, for example, where I failed to recognize

a single vegetable on sale. Nor the goosebumps I felt when I came across a traditional Japanese wedding party at a park in Tokyo – the silk kimono and white face of the bride glowing against a futuristic backdrop of skyscrapers. The other-worldly atmosphere of a Taoist mountain shrine; the fabulous intricacy of a mosaic-encrusted Timurid dome rising from the midst of a Silk Road city; and the elegant simplicity of a wooden farmstead in the hills of South Korea. In Europe, such treasures would be vestiges of a dimly remembered past. But in the East, they're part of living traditions – with astonishingly ancient roots.

Sharing such discoveries and translating them into enjoyable holidays for our guests are among the most enriching aspects of our job. At TransIndus we take great pride in our expertise. Our consultants have all lived, worked and travelled extensively in their specialist countries and return regularly to refresh their knowledge. We also place great importance on our standards of personal care and attention to detail – qualities that have repeatedly made us an award-winning travel company.

We hope you'll agree this passion shines through the writing and photography presented in our Far East brochure, and that they will serve to inspire your own unique journeys through these astonishing countries over the coming years.



Amrit Singh
Managing Director, TransIndus



亞洲東部

The Far East

For centuries, a combination of unforgiving geography and mistrust of foreigners among its Emperors meant that eastern Asia was almost entirely unknown to Europeans – a source of exquisite silks, ceramics and tea, but a true Terra Incognita, visited by only a handful of intrepid explorer-merchants since the time of Marco Polo in the 13th century.

Now, of course, it's all different. The great capitals of imperial China, Japan's widely scattered archipelago, and even the most far-flung outposts of the Silk Route may be reached in a day's journey from London. And when you arrive, you'll find clean, comfortable hotels awaiting you, quality roads connecting the major sights and state-of-the-art vehicles to travel in.

You'll also, in all likelihood, encounter many fellow travellers from the Far East itself. Spurred by the double-digit growth of past decades, there has been an explosion of regional tourism within China and the wider region. Which has thrown up new challenges. Now, more than ever, the key to putting together an enjoyable itinerary depends on finding places that are a little off the beaten track, where you can sidestep the crowds and relax in a tranquil location, visiting the mainstream sights on day trips.

Authentic Asia | In the following pages, you'll find dozens of great discoveries we've made where it's possible to do just that. From camel markets on the sand-blown fringes of the Gobi Desert, to homely ryokan inns with outdoor hot tubs in rural Japan, TransIndus researchers have scoured the length and breadth of the Far East to offer the most rewarding experiences the region has to offer. Whatever your time frame

or budget, our consultants will be able to devise a trip full of variety and inspiration that really gets under the skin of your chosen destination.

We begin our brochure with China, stretching from the Great Wall and Terracotta Army of Xi'an to the pandas and distant snow peaks of Yunnan. Next up come the highlights of Japan, a country whose determination to embrace the ways of the West predated that of its neighbours, yet whose adherence to its own traditional culture remains more resolute than anywhere else in the Far East. Then we move on to South Korea and Taiwan, two countries that are better known for their remarkable post-war economic metamorphosis, but which between them hold some of the finest landscapes and exotic cultural experiences in the Far East.

Distant Frontiers | Finally, we follow the old Silk Routes north and west across the grasslands of Mongolia, across the Gobi and Taklamakan Deserts and over the snow-capped Tianshan mountains into Kyrgyzstan, whose wild landscapes are sprinkled in summer with the camps of nomadic herders. Pressing through the Fergana Valley into Uzbekistan, we then reach the most distant point on the TransIndus tour map – the splendid oasis cities of the Timurid dynasty, whose ethereal mosques and tombs inspired the architects of Mughal India.

Putting this brochure together has rekindled some wonderful travel memories for us. We hope, in turn, that the following pages will inspire you to experience the wonders of the Far East and Central Asia for yourself. They're probably not as far away as you think!

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TransIndus tailor-made holidays

Our customers place great value on their holidays, often spending considerable time and effort researching destinations and the kinds of activities on offer. We will be with you every step of the way on this journey, helping you make the best choices at planning stage, and ensuring things run smoothly while you're away.

It all starts with an informal chat – either over the phone, or face-to-face at our London office – in which we'll gain a sense of your precise requirements. We'll then put together an itinerary, taking into account how long you'd like to spend away, your aspirations and what your budget is. This itinerary will then be refined over the course of further conversations until you're completely happy with every detail of your trip.

Flexibility | Travelling tailor-made instead of opting for an off-the-peg tour gives you much greater flexibility. Although every country and sub-region has its unmissable highlights, there's rarely a single route around them. You may have specific interests which you'd like to pursue, or a list of less well-known destinations that you'd like to include. This is where our expertise comes in: having explored each destination in depth, often several times over, our consultants will be able to suggest the best order in which to visit them, as well as the most rewarding excursions and hotels.

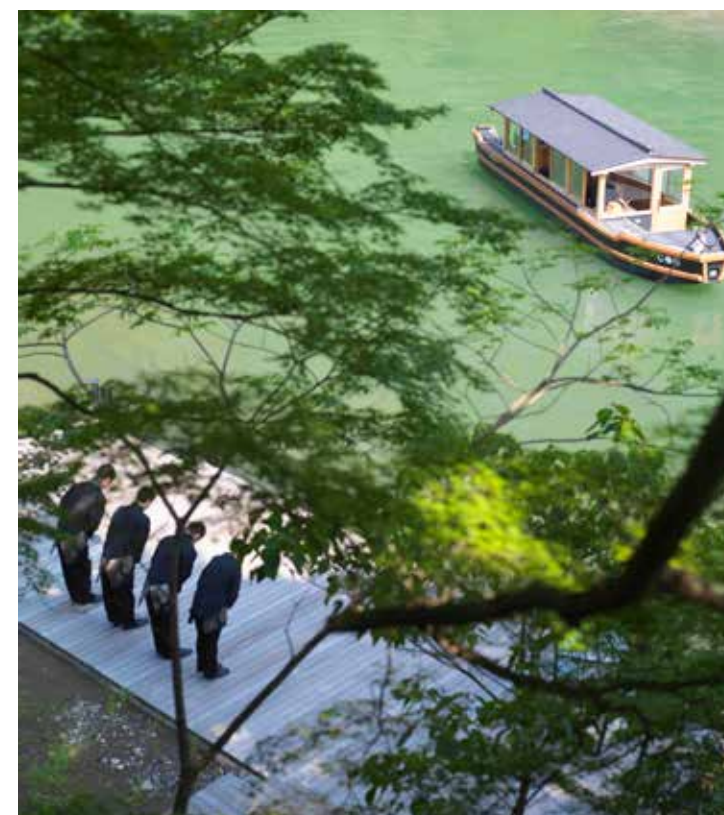
Smooth Travel | We'll also discuss meal plans with you, and make all your transport arrangements in advance. Chauffeur driven, air-conditioned cars tend to be our preferred option for most countries in the Far East (with the exception of Japan, whose public transport system offers exceptional comfort and value for money), as they allow you to make more frequent

stops along the way – though you may well need to add some domestic flights to cover longer distances. One of our expert, English-speaking guides will also be assigned to you for day trips to historic and religious sites, markets and other destinations where in-depth local knowledge is desirable.

A critical element we take care of, of course, is your international flight. Experience has shown us the best routings, stopovers and departure times for hubs across the Far East and Central Asia, and we'll be able to suggest the most comfortable, time-saving option for you, whether you're travelling alone, as a couple or in a larger family group with children.

Special Places to Stay | TransIndus understands how important accommodation is to one's overall enjoyment of a country, which is why we go to great lengths to find the loveliest hotels and guest houses in all of our destinations. Landmark luxury hotels, particularly those with a colonial-era pedigree, are perennial favourites among our clients, but we also favour smaller heritage and boutique properties where greater emphasis is placed on traditional architecture and interior design, and where the setting of the hotel itself is central to its appeal.

Throughout this brochure, we've highlighted examples of hotels and guest houses that stand out from the crowd, offer exceptional service and represent great value for money. A fuller rundown of our preferred accommodation options appears on our website, and of course, your TransIndus holiday designer will know of other commendable places that may have opened more recently in your chosen destination.



Why TransIndus?

Among the UK's largest and most successful operators of tailor-made tours to Asia, TransIndus features twenty-four different countries in the continent. With decades of experience designing journeys and a wealth of hard-won travel knowledge and local contacts to draw on, we are able to create trips of the highest possible quality, featuring the most desirable destinations and memorable activities. This expertise, backed by gold-standard customer service, has ensured our company consistently generates satisfaction ratings of 99%. Over half our clients travel more than once with us, or else have been referred by family, friends or colleagues.

'Your journey. Our expertise.' | Our goal is simple: to devise holidays that are both relaxing and culturally stimulating, and perfectly tailored for your needs. All TransIndus team members travel regularly to their specialist regions to keep abreast of the latest developments, and are passionate about sharing their discoveries. If a beautiful new heritage-boutique hotel opens in an off-track location, they'll know if it's worth staying there and which its best rooms are. If a particular coastal resort has grown too crowded, they'll be able to suggest a lesser frequented alternative, and the best monuments, nature sanctuaries and lunch stops to pause at en route. Or if you want to spend a few days river cruising, they'll know which of the boats offer the most varied routes and best value for your budget.

Sound Advice | Throughout, 'authenticity' is our watchword. We want our clients to enjoy not just a revitalizing, inspirational holiday, but return home feeling that they have had a genuine insight into the countries visited. We achieve this by recommending destinations that may not feature in guidebooks, and sidestepping the frequently visited places in favour of lesser known gems.

Whether you're dreaming of a cultural trip highlighting historic monuments and the arts, or a nature-based one with wildlife as its focus, you will find us passionate about our destinations and committed to offering you quality at every stage of your journey.



Financial Protection: Peace of Mind

All our clients are financially protected. When booking with TransIndus, you can rest assured that, should your travel arrangements be disrupted by circumstances beyond your control, you'll be fully refunded. Flight-inclusive holidays are covered by our Air Travel Organiser's License (ATOL 3429), granted by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), while those without flights are protected by our financial bond with the Association of Bonded Travel Organisers Trust (ABTOT 5510). In the unlikely event of an emergency, the CAA and ABTA ensure you will not be stranded abroad. And if you haven't already left the UK, they'll also make sure your money is refunded fully. In addition, we are proud members of the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO), whose 'Client's Charter' assures you of the highest standards of service.





Michael Wood: “My Favourite Places in China”

The historian, author, broadcaster and long-time Sinophile shares his top travel tips for a country he first visited over three decades ago . . .

I first got hooked on China in my teens reading Penguin translations of Chinese poetry, which opened up a world I'd never dreamed of. I first went there in the 1980s and still remember the hospitality and sociability of the people and that has not changed, though much else has!

Here are the places we especially enjoyed during the filming of the BBC series, *The Story of China*.

Beijing | With the smog alerts of recent years, you may well pale at the thought of holidaying here - but Beijing is still one of the world's greatest historic cities. There are still so many interesting nooks and crannies, and the Altar of Heaven is one of the world's great sites. Beyond the city are amazing things too: the Ming tombs, the Great Wall, the Palace at Jehol, the list is endless. And after your long day's sightseeing, how about a cup of hot chocolate by the lakeside in the Bohemian Houhai quarter, where young Chinese folk singers strum their songs of love.

Suzhou | 'There are two Paradises on Earth' the proverb runs, 'Suzhou and Hangzhou.' So why not get them both on one trip? Just inland from Shanghai (fascinating itself of course), you can stay in Suzhou in a converted Ming merchant's house. The old city of canals and alleys is still a delightful place with its pagodas and exquisite gardens, not to mention its restaurants and silk shops.

Xidi and Hongcun | A train journey inland from Shanghai is the fabulous landscape of Huangshan, the loveliest of China's sacred mountains. You can stay in ancient houses in the heritage villages of Xidi and Hongcun; Tangyue has a very nice new hotel run by the Bao Family.

Xi'an | Some travellers are put off by Xi'an, which is a very busy city these days, but still a fascinating one. The Terracotta Army, of course, is a must. But there's also the Wild Goose Pagoda where the Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang came back from India

with packloads of manuscripts and began his great translation programme. Take a bike round the top of the Ming walls, and explore the backstreets and the Muslim food markets.

Luoyang | The picturesque city of Luoyang is a long-time favourite of mine, but you may need to hurry: last time I was there, there were plans to 'restore' its Old Town - one of the best in China. In the centre of the modern city is an amazing underground museum built over recently discovered chariot burials. Nearby are the Longmen Caves at the end of the Silk Road, with their giant Buddhas, and the superb precinct of the White Horse Pagoda.

Kashgar | The Silk Road has its own stories: a world away from Beijing (literally: it takes seven hours to fly to Kashgar!). The city has boomed since I first saw it in 1984, but the old quarter is still a picturesque Central Asian crossroads, with mosques and mansions, and the legendary Sunday market. Combine with a stopover in Turfan to see ruined desert cities, the caves of Beziklik, and the Flaming Mountains.

Kaifeng | Finally back to the Yellow River Plain, the heartland of Chinese civilisation: the "Middle Land" (Zhongguo) which gives China its name in Chinese. I have always liked Kaifeng, an out of the way provincial place when I first stayed thirty years ago, but the greatest city in the world a thousand years ago in the Song Renaissance. Reachable in a day trip from Luoyang, the city still has its walls; on the main street is the Buddhist Xiangguo temple with its leafy courtyards; its temple orchestra reassembled and playing again: they even do excellent vegetarian lunches! But the old city is the most fun: in its warren of alleys are Christian churches, all-women mosques (with women imams!) and even China's last Jewish community. My only fear: the planners will soon start knocking down Kaifeng's delightful warren of real-life crumbling alleys to make a spanking new Heritage tourist site.





China

Cut off from the rest of Asia by the Russian steppes to the north and the Himalayas to the south, China has spent literally thousands of years refining and innovating its ancient cultures. Today's rush for modernity may seem to replicate the style of the west, but it is being conducted in a manner that is unmistakably Chinese – all of which makes travelling in this vast country a uniquely compelling experience. Undiminished by the economic revolution taking place around them, China's Big Five sights – the Great Wall, Forbidden City in Beijing, Terracotta Army, Yangtze Gorges and limestone mountains around Guilin and Yangshuo – all retain their timeless allure. For the most vivid taste of old China, however, we recommend visiting smaller, less frequented destinations between the headline locations or, time permitting, venturing to the country's far southern and western provinces, whose rural heartlands preserve architecture and ways of life little altered since the Ming and Qing eras.



Highlights of China

The Great Wall | Undulating across the northern border of China, the chain of defences known as 'the Long Wall of a Thousand Li' form as striking a spectacle today as they did 2,000 years ago.

Harbin Ice Festival | Held every January in the far northeast of China, Harbin's world-famous ice festival is an over-the-top, totally irresistible way of beating those winter blues. Think Disneyland, but colder!

Xi'an and the Terracotta Warriors | Travel by bullet train to Xi'an, jumping-off place for the famous Terracotta Army, created in 210 BC to guard the grave of the first Chinese Emperor.

Leshan Giant Buddha | Carved from a salmon-coloured cliff face, this colossal statue of Maitreya (the Buddha to Come) dates from the Tang Dynasty (8th century) and is the largest stone Buddha in the world.

Li River Cruise | Passing through a range of peaks, the boat trip between Guilin and Yangshuo on the limpid Li River takes you through a landscape of soaring pinnacles and shimmering rice paddies.

Pandas, Chengdu | Watch the world's cutest animals, including adorable baby bears cavorting around their playground, at the Giant Panda Breeding Research Base in the city of Chengdu, Sichuan Province.

'Dragon's Backbone' Rice Terraces | In the district of Longsheng, entire mountainsides have been worked into elegantly curved rice terraces resembling the scales of a giant dragon.

Mogao Caves, Dunhuang | This ensemble of rock-cut caves, chiselled from sandstone and Loess cliffs, close to the northern Silk Road, is the jewel in the crown of China's Buddhist complexes.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+8 hours
Flying time: 9.30 hours
Currency: Renminbi
Capital: Beijing

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	-4	-6	5	14	20	25	26	25	20	13	4	-2
Rainfall mm	4	5	8	17	35	78	243	141	58	16	11	3
Best to travel	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●	●
	●● The best time to travel		● A good time to travel			● Low season						

Be inspired

For help planning your perfect holiday, contact us at the Old Fire Station, Ealing, London.
 Tel: **020 8566 3739**
 Web: www.transindus.com



Beijing

With its horizons of tower cranes and smog-shrouded skyscrapers, Beijing is a city which has totally reinvented itself in less than a generation, and not without growing pains. At the same time, the high-octane Chinese capital has managed to maintain strong links with its more traditional past. From the awe-inspiring palaces of the Ming emperors, to the gleaming glass-and-steel creations of the Olympic Park and iconic Bird's Nest Stadium, Beijing encompasses more than five centuries of ceaseless creativity and innovation, making it the perfect introduction to China's complex history.

Confronted by such a profusion of sights it's easy to be overwhelmed. Which is why we recommend you limit yourself to just a couple of major landmarks per day, and take plenty of time to savour the more mundane, but utterly compelling, sides of city life: senior citizens practising Tai Chi in the parks; the bustle of the narrow, medieval hutongs (backstreets); and the endless games of chess played around the Temple of Heaven. In the evenings, sample fine cuisines in Beijing's famous restaurants, enjoy scintillating acrobatic performances by the State Circus, and marvel at the exotic splendour of Chinese classical opera.



Temple of Heaven

Widely regarded as Beijing's most exquisite building, the Temple of Heaven marked the spiritual heart of Imperial China in the early 15th century. Each year on the summer solstice, the emperor would perform an elaborate ritual here to ensure the success of the harvest. Reflecting its ceremonial significance, the whole complex was set out according to principles of Confucian sacred geometry, with the circular, wooden, polychrome 'Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests' as its focal point. Of equal fascination for visitors are the colonnaded hallways and parkland surrounding the temple complex, where local people gather to play the double-stringed *erhu*, sing folk songs and paint Mandarin calligraphy with long brushes on the dusty paving stones.

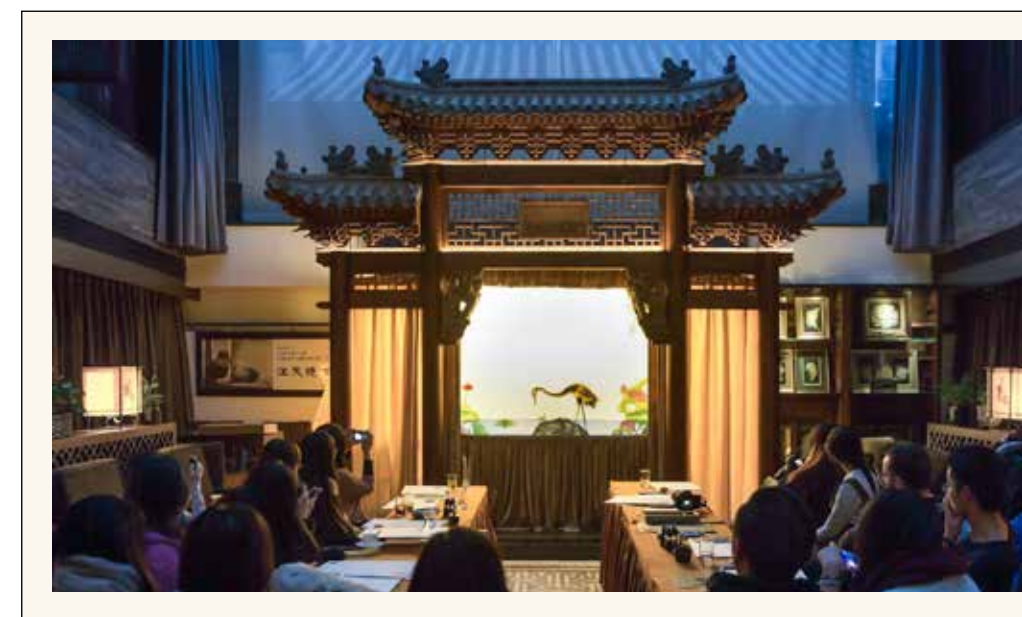


The 'Forbidden City'

Comprising over 800 buildings ranged around a series of vast paved courtyards, Beijing's Gugong, or 'Imperial Palace', formed the nerve centre of the Ming and Qing empires. For the five centuries during which it was in use, this magnificent complex lay off-limits to ordinary citizens, whence its nickname, 'the Forbidden City'. Today, the palace gates are open to all and the thousands of royal chambers within host a splendid museum.

Approach from the south via Tiananmen Square, then cross the wide moat to enter the Women ('Meridian') Gate, where Chairman Mao first proclaimed the creation of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949. Inside, the palace's many chambers and walkways hold displays of priceless ceramics, calligraphy, weapons, ceremonial robes and paintings.

At the core of the palace lie the three Great Halls, where the emperors used to preside over important state occasions and inspect their troops, flanked by guards of Burmese elephants. Crowds of up to 100,000 subjects used to gather in the mighty courtyards before them, kow-towing nine times when their ruler took his place on the ornate Dragon Throne. Beyond the walls to the north, the rockeries, pavilions and cypress trees of the Imperial Gardens provide a serene counterpoint to the vast structures and open spaces of the palace proper.

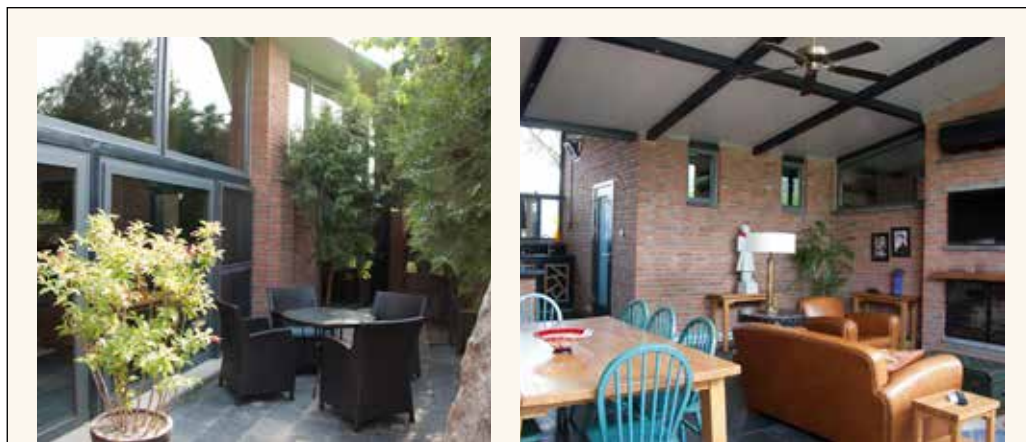


Shichahai Shadow Art Performance Hotel

We love this pint-sized, great value boutique hotel buried deep in the narrowest hutong blocks of old Beijing. Close to the breezy Imperial Lakes, it offers a cosy, stylish, convenient base from which to explore the city, with sleek contemporary interiors of wood and stone inflected with traditional Ming motifs. Its USP, though, is the little gabled stage in the inner courtyard, where performances of old-world shadow puppetry are held each evening – a cultural delight. China was where this ancient form of story telling originated, though it has almost died out elsewhere in the country.

Chengde

Framed by the rippled slopes of the Yunshan Mountains, the magnificent Imperial Mountain Resort in Chengde, 155 miles (250km) north of Beijing on the banks of the Wulie River, served as a summer season retreat for the Manchu emperors. The complex had a dual function: part holiday home; part charm offensive. Potentially troublesome princes from the provinces were invited here to be pampered for a few weeks in the hope this would render them more amenable to the will of the empire. But whereas the Forbidden City impressed its vassals by a show of grandeur and implacability, the Mountain Resort did so with unabashed joie de vivre. Its centrepiece remains the sumptuous royal apartment. Kept as a museum, the buildings hold a wealth of art, furniture and everyday utensils that yield vivid insights into the luxurious lifestyle of the Qing court.



Brickyard Retreat, Mutianyu

We're always on the lookout for special places to stay in off-beat locations where you can experience bucolic pockets of rural China in stylish comfort, and were thrilled when we discovered this wonderful boutique hotel at the foot of the Great Wall. Created by an expat couple, its hub is an old glazed tile factory, where former kilns and workshops have been converted into luxury guest rooms. Recycled bricks and ceramic-mosaic panels create an earthy, homely feel, while picture windows frame views of the nearby wall. Private grounds with fruit trees and a discrete hot tub enfold the property - a heavenly base for wall treks and leisurely bike rides.

The Great Wall

China's Great Wall undulates for over 12,400 miles (20,000km) across the north of the country - an astounding engineering feat and vivid testament to both the might of the emperors who built it, and the fear inspired by the Mongol hordes whom it was designed to repel. Work on the fortifications began in the 5th century BC, but peaked during the Ming era (14th-17th century), when much of the rammed earth and brickwork was replaced by dressed stone and the majority of the hallmark square lookout towers were erected.

Sections of the wall are easily reachable in a day trip from Beijing, but it pays to pick your spot, particularly on weekends and public holidays. To avoid the queues and crowds, we recommend the 6-mile (11-km) stretch between Jinshanling and Simatai, which is much wilder and set amid truly spectacular scenery - ideal for soft trekking. For the less sure-footed, we also like Mutianyu, where the ramparts have been well reconstructed and a cable car ensures easy access to high battlements yielding more superb views.



Beyond the Great Wall



Tian Chi Hu & the Changbai Shan Nature Reserve

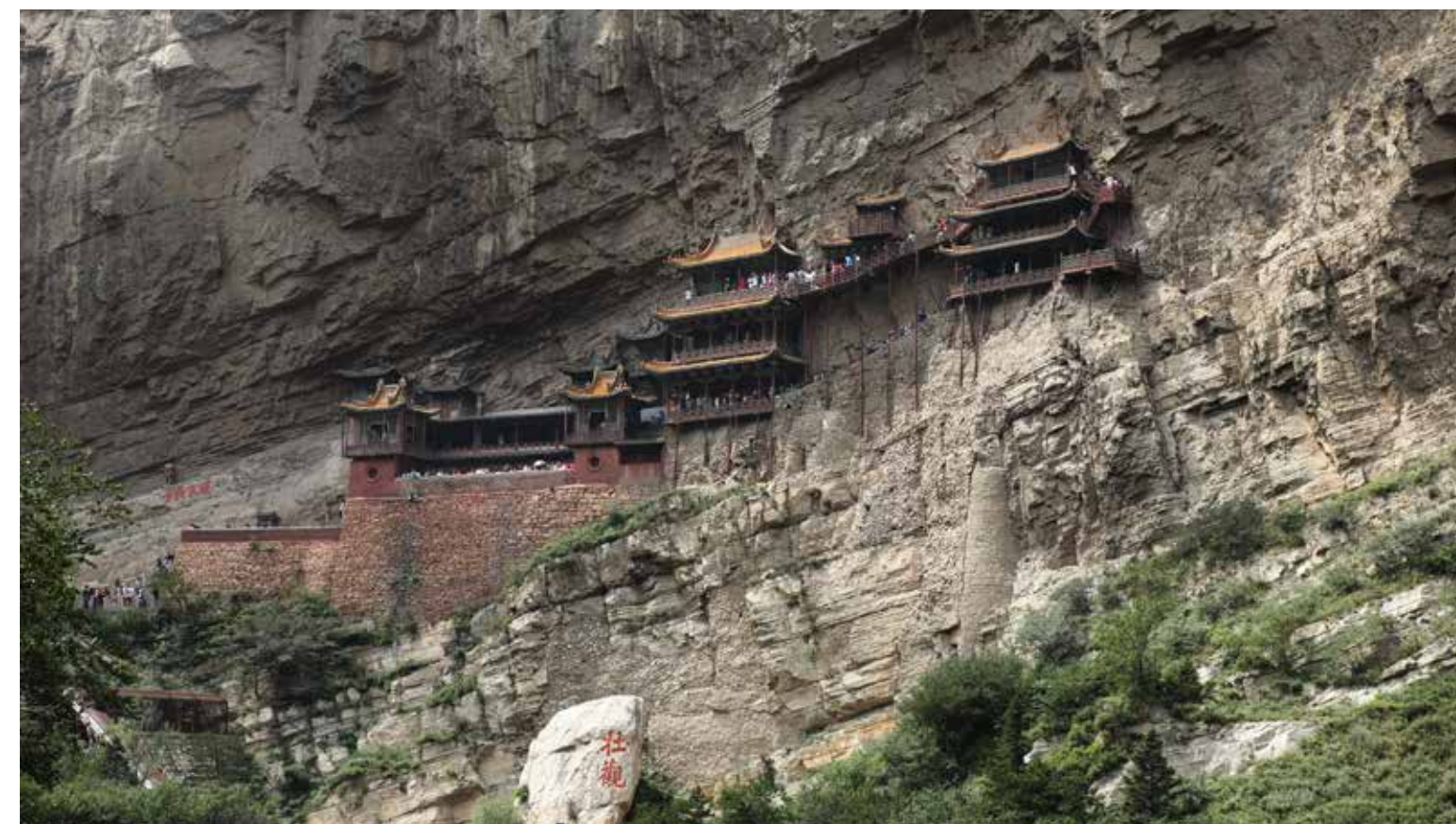
A contender for the title 'China's Greatest View' has to be the panorama of jagged peaks, boulder-strewn snow fields and waterfalls surrounding Tian Chi Hu, a spectacular crater lake on the border of North Korea. Filling a windswept caldera, the lake's deep-cobalt-blue waters form the centrepiece of the Changbai Shan Nature Reserve, a park visited by large numbers of Chinese but surprisingly few foreigners. In summer, thousands of walkers every day hike up the flight of 1,000 steps to the viewing platform overlooking the lake. In 2007, one visitor shot a video showing the fins of 6 creatures believed to inhabit the caldera's water - China's own Loch Ness Monsters!



Harbin

Formerly the last outpost of civilization before the onset of the Siberian Wilderness, Harbin rose to prominence in the late-19th century after the completion of the railway to Vladivostok. The line encouraged many Russian immigrants to the city, which became known as "Little Moscow" for the profusion of onion-domed Orthodox churches that dominated its skyline. The grandest of these, the Cathedral of St Sofia, still stands in the main square, its green domes and gilded crosses now splendidly restored.

Harbin's principal attraction, however, is the great Ice Festival held here each January-February. More picturesque Russian architecture is to be found amid the narrow backstreets of the Daoli shopping district.



The Hanging Temple

No matter how many pictures of it you may have seen beforehand, your first glimpse of the iconic Xuankong temple outside Datong is guaranteed to evoke gasps of amazement. Clinging to a near vertical sandstone escarpment, 246ft (75m) off the floor of a hidden valley, the upswept roofs and wooden galleries of the shrine have hung precariously over the same void for nearly 1,500 years. Oak beams driven into postholes in the cliff provide support for this gravity-defying edifice, whose halls, hollowed from the rocks, contain Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian deities.



Wutai Shan

Rising to over 3,000m (10,000ft), Wutai is the highest peak in northern China and one of the country's most sacred sites. Streams of locals make the ascent to the summit every day, pausing en route to worship at some of the 53 monasteries that cling to the sides of the thickly forested massif, which Buddhists regard as the home of the bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjusri. Dating from the 8th and 9th century, these shrines include the oldest surviving wood-built temple in China and are exquisitely decorated.



Harbin Ice Festival

With temperatures plunging to -20°C or below, teams of artists from all over the world fly in to Harbin, early January until the Chinese New Year, in early February, to carve a fairyland of castles, rides and other large-scale structures from blocks of solid ice. Lit with coloured lights at night, the creations are accompanied by a huge array of snow figures on nearby Sun Island, along with convoluted toboggan and tube tracks. Visitors may walk across the frozen Songhua River to reach the site, or travel by horse-drawn carriage. The end of the event is marked with an exuberant firework display, followed by the mass destruction of the ice sculptures.

The Yungang Grottoes

Miraculous vestiges from the 5th and 6th centuries, the Yungang Caves honeycomb a spread of sandstone cliffs outside the city of Datong, a day's journey west of Beijing in Shanxi Province. The grottoes were carved by the Northern Wei dynasty over a period of around seventy years, beginning in 453 AD, and remain in a remarkable state of preservation. Influences from ancient Greece, Persia, Ceylon and India are detectable in the finely sculpted features of the giant Buddhas, and swirls of minor deities, bodhisattvas, celestial nymphs and decorative motifs surrounding them. The interiors of many shrines also retain wonderfully vibrant paintings, rendered in earthy reds, yellow ochre and lapis blue.



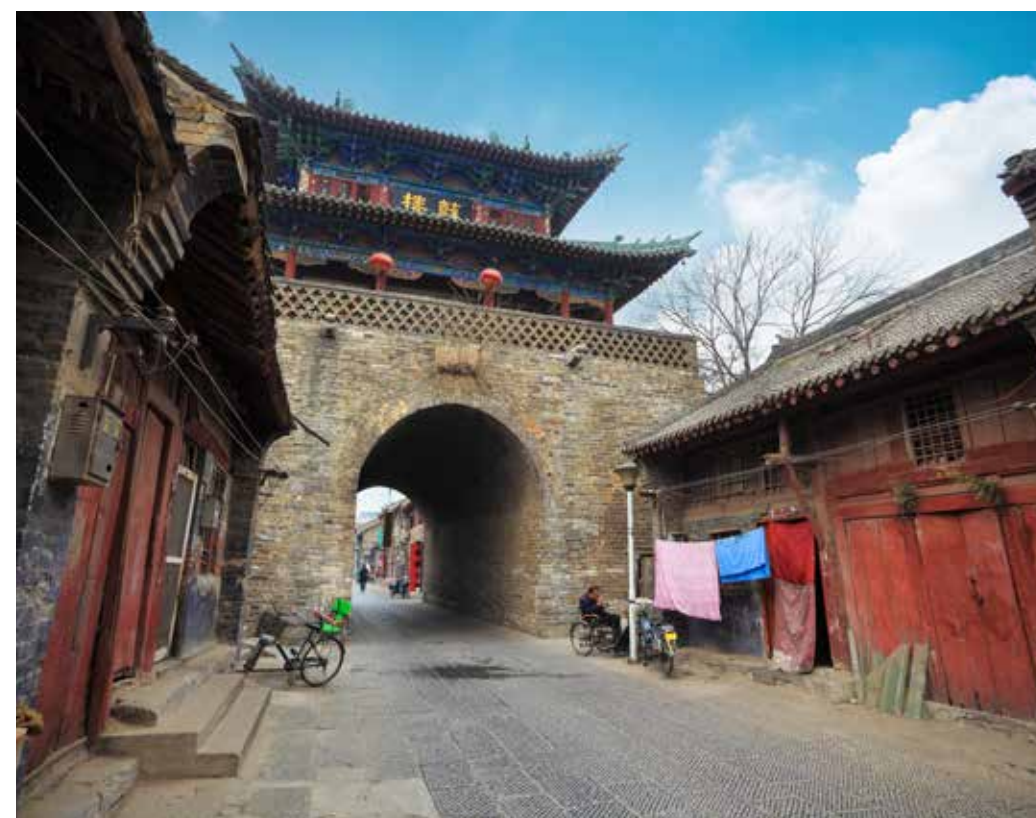
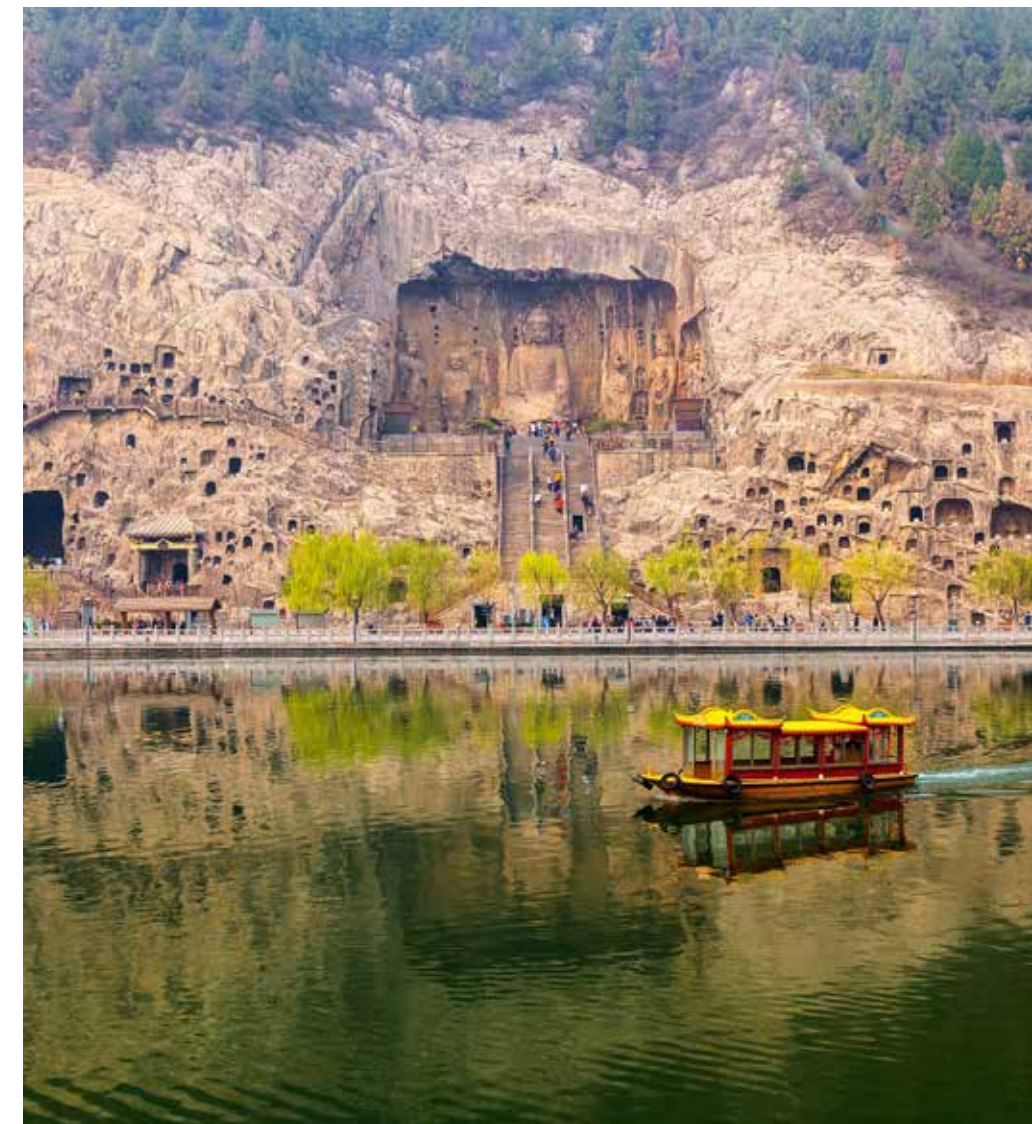
Pingyao

With its bumper crop of antique buildings dating from the Ming and Qing eras, this gem of a walled town makes an ideal stopover if you're travelling overland between Beijing and Xi'an. Strolling through its paved streets, whose thousands of old houses, courtyard mansions and shopfronts remain gloriously free of garish modern signboards and motorized traffic, feels like stepping into a scene from a Chinese epic. Most impressive of all are the immaculately preserved, late-14th-century walls, which retain their barbican gates and original watchtowers, from where the views over Pingyao's time-warped roofscape of red-tiled, upswept eaves are wonderful.



Longmen Grottoes

On the banks of the Yi River just south of Luoyang in Henan Province, the Longmen Cave complex was begun by the Northern Wei dynasty in 439 AD and completed by the Tang emperors. In all, some 10,000 figures were carved out of the limestone cliffs looming above the water here, the largest of them 17 meters tall. Seeing the giant Buddhas for the first time after climbing the flight of steps leading from the river is a goose-bump-inducing experience. Although reachable via superfast train from Xi'an, the site has not been overdeveloped like many in China and retains a serene atmosphere, particularly in the morning.



Luoyang

The uniformly modern appearance of Luoyang belies its extraordinary antiquity. Ranged around the confluence of the Luo and Yellow Rivers, the city has been a major urban centre for more than three millennia, yielding traces of civilization dating back to 2070 BC. Nearly every recent building project has uncovered many layers of human artefacts. The finest of them are displayed in the city's superb museum, whose pièce de résistance is an assemblage of sacrificial pits containing the remains of royal horses, chariots, jade and metal goods.



Dengfeng, Songshan Mountain & Shaolin

A side trip neatly combined with the Longmen Caves is a visit to Songshan, one of China's Five Great Mountains, which rises behind the town of Dengfeng, an hour's drive east of Luoyang. Streams of martial arts enthusiasts travel to the area to visit or study at the famous Shaolin Temple, birthplace of Chinese Kung Fu. One of the great spectacles of this part of the world is the daily exercise ritual when thousands of Kung Fu students dressed in matching suits perform synchronized routines in local temple courtyards, squares and hilltop platforms.

Testifying to the town's great antiquity, the Zhongye Miao temple on the eastern outskirts of Dengfeng was founded 2,000 years ago but recreated in its present form during the Ming era. Wander the paved courtyards and relax under the shade of ancient trees, with the elegant ceramic roofs silhouetted against the wooded hillside behind. With time, you can follow a path all the way up the mountain for spellbinding views over the Yellow River basin to the north.

National Treasures

China

In 2013, the Chinese authorities added 94 items to a list of 101 precious relics already identified as 'Class 1 National Treasures'. Spanning 4,000 years of culture, from the Neolithic to the Qing era, all are exquisite, priceless artefacts, regarded as the finest expressions of Chinese civilization ever discovered. Each has a special story, revealing something unique about the time and place in which it originated. The other thing that sets these items apart is that they will never be seen outside China.

The following are among our favourites. They can all easily be slotted into a tailor-made tour.

The Gansu Flying Horse | Gansu Provincial Museum, Lanzhou. Dating from the 2nd century AD, this famous bronze depicts one of the legendary 'Heavenly Horses' beloved of China's ancient warlords. It is shown in mid-stride, head erect, with one hoof delicately poised on a bird, which looks up indignantly – an image full of timeless grace, and humour.

He Zun, Baoji Bronze Museum | near Xi'an, Shaanxi. The consummate skill of bronze casters from the Zhou era (1046-771 BC) is vividly displayed in this ornate ritual urn, whose donatory inscription includes the earliest reference to China so far discovered.

Horse Chariots, Museum of the Terracotta Army | near Xi'an. In a museum of many wonders, the two half-size chariots, each pulled by teams of four horses and ridden by a charioteer under a parasol, stand out for their lifelike quality.

Phoenix Crowns, National Museum Beijing | It seems almost futile to pick out just one treasure from the wonderful national collection, but the famous Ming fengguan crowns, culled from the tomb of the Wanli Emperor, linger in the memory longer than most.

Bronze Tree, Sanxingdui Museum | near Chengdu, Sichuan. Adorned with mythical birds and fruit, with a dragon curling up its trunk, this beautiful, 4-metre-tall bronze Spirit Tree dates from the 11th century BC and is displayed alongside huge, bulging-eyed idols found on the same ancient site.

Musician Figurines on a Camel | Shaanxi History Museum, Shaanxi. 'Sancai' figures are ceramic treasures dating from the Tang era and this one, showing a group of eight musicians playing instruments on camel back as their mount roars (with disapproval, one imagines), looks as fresh and full of life now as it did when it was fired 1,300 years ago.





Xi'an

Xi'an, capital of populous Shaanxi Province, is one of China's fastest expanding industrial centres, and at first glance seems to hold little promise for visitors. For over two thousand years, however, this well watered city at the heart of the Guanzhong Plain served as the seat of China's ruling dynasties - 'Chang'an', or 'the Axis of the World' - rivalled in its day only by Baghdad and Constantinople. Behind the skyscrapers and flyovers, many impressive vestiges survive from these past civilizations, including the most complete set of Ming-era ramparts in the county. Above all, however, Xi'an is noteworthy as the springboard for visits to the Terracotta Army and necropolis complex of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, which lie in the countryside 17 miles (28km) east.



The Terracotta Army

In 1974, a couple of farm workers digging a well in the fields outside Xi'an uncovered the limb of a terracotta figure. What they didn't know then, and which only became apparent after years of careful excavation, was that the statue formed part of an army of more than 8,000 soldiers, horses and chariots buried below ground in three huge pits, each the size of several football pitches.

The discovery ranked among the most sensational archaeological finds of all time. Until you set eyes on the subterranean legion, lined up in long trenches now protected by giant hangers, it's hard to comprehend the scale of the project. Yet the long-buried army is only one part of a much larger ensemble that includes a colossal, man-made mound - still unexcavated, and thought to hold the actual tomb of Qin Shi Huang, China's first emperor, who reigned in the second century BC.

Apart from the bewildering size of the site, what most impresses about the Terracotta Army is how unnervingly lifelike the figures are. Each one has its own distinct facial expression, posture, hair style, clothing and weapons, preserved in amazing detail.

City Walls

Extending in an unbroken rectangle of 9 miles (14km), the great walls erected in 1370 during the Ming era around the capital, then known as 'Chang'an', are among the oldest, largest and best preserved of their kind in China. They're made of rammed earth and distinctive 'blue bricks', are more than 15m (50ft) thick and 12m high, with four night watchtowers at the corners. Besides walking, a memorable way of experiencing them is to cycle around the ramparts on a rented bicycle, pausing at regular intervals to admire the spectacular views over the inner city.



Hua Shan

The limestone summits of Hua Shan, one of China's five sacred Taoist mountains, surge in spectacular fashion from the plains of the Yellow River basin, midway between Xi'an and Luoyang. Traditionally regarded as the most forbidding of the great holy massifs, it used to attract only die-hard hermits, plant hunters, shamanic priests and very determined local pilgrims. In recent years, however, cable cars have been installed to carry day trippers to its upper reaches, rendering the mountain accessible for anyone who is moderately fit. Aside from the special atmosphere of the old paved walkways, with their incense-filled shrines and stands of wind-bent pine trees, the main incentive to make the climb are the sublime views from its five main peaks.

Xi'an's Temples, Markets & Mosques

The most iconic of Xi'an's many historic monuments is the soaring Giant Wild Goose Pagoda (659 AD). It was originally built by the Tang Emperor, Gaozong in the late 7th century, but substantially enlarged by his redoubtable wife, Empress Wu Zetian, who seized power after his death. She added five new storeys to the original eight, making this one of the tallest buildings in the world at the time. There are now only seven floors, and after sustaining earthquake damage on a few occasions, the pagoda tilts perceptibly - though it's perfectly safe to ascend, via a handsome wooden staircase inside.

The other poster piece in the city is the huge Drum Tower, erected in 1380 at the same time as the Ming ramparts. The structure derives its name from the fact that a large drum placed inside it used to be struck in the evening to announce the start of curfew. The backstreets behind it comprise the Muslim (Hui) quarter, where men wear shiite skull caps and the air is charged with the aroma of baking bread and sesame oil produced in small neighbourhood factories. Its main street, Beiyuanmen, is great for an aimless wander in the evening, when a huge array of snacks are prepared at terrace kitchens. Try the famous Jiansan steamed buns and glistening red persimmon pies.

In the same district, northwest of the Drum Tower, the Great Mosque is one of the oldest and best preserved in China - an exquisite building blending classical Chinese and Islamic styles. Its four interlocking courtyards contain superb examples of ancient calligraphy and carved wood gateways dating from the mid-8th century. At the building's heart is an impressive prayer hall that accommodates up to a thousand worshippers at one time. Descended from Arab and Persian merchants who first arrived in the Chinese capital in the 7th century, the city's Hui minority are a living legacy of the old Silk Roads and transcontinental trade they facilitated.

Great Museums

The Terracotta Army is far from the only archaeological treasure of note to be seen in Xi'an. Another superb collection of antiquities is housed at the Shaanxi History Museum, close to the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, whose pride and joy is a wonderful collection of 3,000-year-old bronze ritual objects dating from the Zhou era.

Although considerably smaller, the museum of Famen Si, 74 miles (120km) west of the city, holds an extraordinary assemblage of priceless Tang artefacts. They were left in the 7th century as offerings alongside precious relics of the Buddha believed to have been donated by Emperor Asoka of India in the third century BC. The sacred remains comprise three finger bones, enclosed in eight nested boxes. Accompanying them were a selection of exquisite gold and silver items and an embroidered silk skirt belonging to Empress Wu Zetian, now enshrined inside a giant modern stupa complex - the Namaste Dagoba - which attracts Buddhist pilgrims from across Asia.



The Tang Tombs

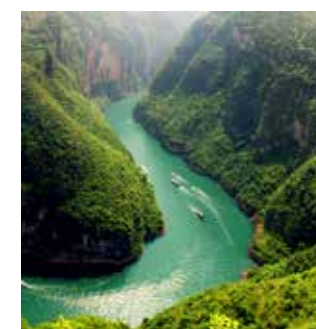
Scattered over the flat plains surrounding Xi'an are dozens of large mounds which archaeologists have only recently identified as tombs of the Han and Tang emperors, their wives, concubines and generals. Lying on the west side of the city around the slopes of Mount Liang, the largest concentration is at Qianling. The site's grandest mausoleum holds the remains of Emperor Gaozong and his consort, the Empress Wu Zetian - the only woman ever to rule China. Flanked by beautifully preserved statues of winged horses, lions, ostriches and (headless) dignitaries, a paved pathway known as the 'Spirit Way' leads to the Empress's tomb. At its head stands one of the great enigmas of Chinese archaeology: the Wordless Stele, an epigraph which for reasons to be established, the empress instructed was to be left blank. Wu Zetian's 1,300-year-old tomb remains unexcavated, but others at Qianling have been cracked open, including several retaining superb murals depicting scenes from the Tang court.

Yangtze Cruising

Flowing for 3,915 miles (6,300km) from the Tibetan Plateau to the East China Sea, the Yangtze is the country's most scenic waterway. A series of dramatic gorges line the great river, which since the completion of the Three Gorges Dam in 2003 has been navigable for most of its length by luxury cruise vessels. The full journey, from Chongqing in the east to Shanghai on the western seaboard, takes 7 days to complete (or 9 in the other direction). For those with less time, we normally recommend covering just the section between Chongqing and Yichang – the most scenically diverse and culturally interesting – which can be completed in 4 days if travelling downstream, or 5 if you start at Yichang and travel westwards against the current. Our favorite vessels are ...

Sanctuary Yangzi Explorer

The smallest of the Yangtze cruisers, with only 62 exclusive cabins and suites (the most spacious on the river), this is the crème de la crème of Yangtze cruisers, and our number one choice. All of the accommodation benefits from private balconies and gorgeous floor-to-ceiling windows yielding expansive views. An unrivalled staff-to-passenger ratio of 1:1 ensures highly personalized service at all times. International-grade, five-star facilities on board include à la carte dining, an indulgent spa, fitness centre, theatre and high observation deck. Passengers may also benefit from a range of on-board activities, including Tai Chi, chinese cookery classes and lessons in traditional Mandarin calligraphy. Another real plus with the Sanctuary is that it visits less crowded sites than its competitors, and uses only the most knowledgeable guides.



Century River Cruises

Century's fleet of seven cruisers, which carry between 198 and 408 passengers, is one of the most modern and well equipped working the Yangtze, and the only one whose boats all have grand atrium lobbies, sun deck bars and private balconies in every cabin. A lively programme of entertainment is provided in the evenings, featuring local opera and dance.



Victoria Cruises

This America-owned company runs cruises year round in boats with capacities ranging from 200 to 400 passengers. Most were built in the 1990s, but have seen major renovation since and offer excellent value for money. Being larger ships, they have the feel of classic cruisers, with elevators and atrium lobbies in their spacious interiors.





City Sights

The contemporary pleasures of shopping, eating and gallery browsing are very much the order of the day here, but you shouldn't miss the fabulous museum – one of China's finest – nor the classical Ming-era gardens of Yu Yuan. To get a sense of what the port must have been like at the twilight of the colonial era, explore the low-rise and leafy French Concession district, where the European powers first took root in the 18th century, and which later became a desirable residential neighbourhood; it's now filled with elegant villas, shops, cafés and restaurants.

The Maglev Train | There's no better way to feel the pulse of modern China on arrival in Shanghai than by taking the futuristic Maglev ('magnetic levitation') Train from Pudong airport into town. The German-designed locomotive floats on a friction-free magnetic cushion that enables it to travel at dizzying speeds of up to 268mph (431km/h), covering the 19 miles (30km) of its route in just 7 minutes. The sensation of hurtling through the green belt at such a velocity is simply amazing, especially when you pass another train travelling in the opposite direction!



Suzhou

Only a 40-minute ride away from Shanghai on the bullet train, Suzhou is an ancient city whose antique core has fared better than many during the recent ferro-concrete revolution. Visitors travel here from Shanghai to wander around the old city's network of cobbled streets and tree-lined canals, with their pretty stone bridges and elegant merchants' houses. Some of China's loveliest classical gardens have survived too, spanning a period of a thousand years when wealthy local administrators and traders competed with each other to create the most delicate, refined havens. Incorporating rockeries, water features, miniature hills, pagodas and pavilions, they're considered among the finest examples of landscape art in the country and have been widely copied.



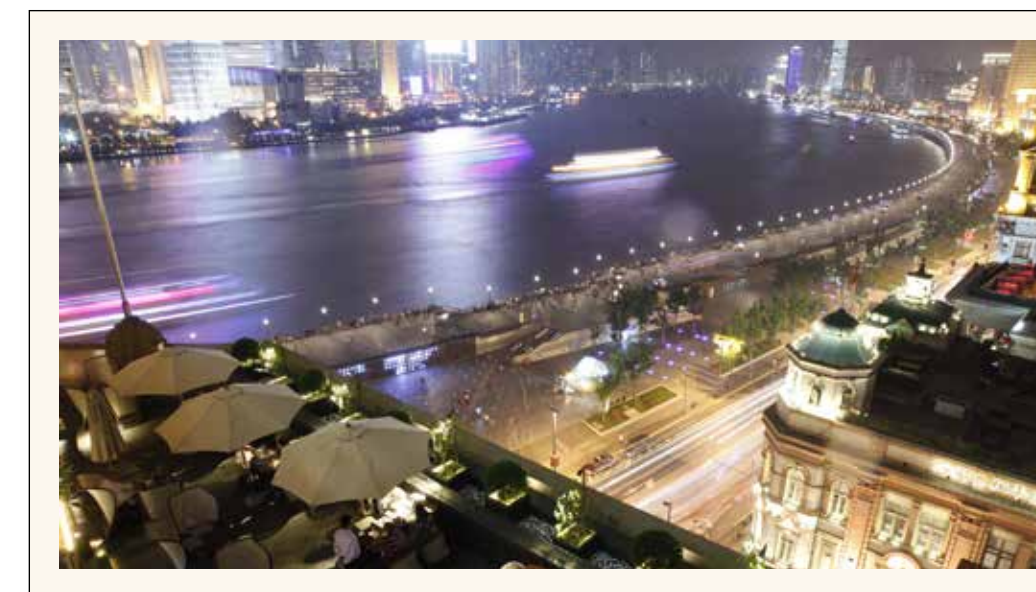
Zhujiajiao

A precious remnant of old China survives on the western fringes of Shanghai at Zhujiajiao – a traditional water town on the Dianpu River. Packed around a network of winding canals is an exceptionally well preserved array of late-medieval shophouses, temples and ceremonial halls, dating from the era when the district oversaw a lucrative trade in cloth, rice and spices. Their whitewashed, dark-wood walls and terracotta roofs have been beautifully maintained and kept free of unsightly signboards. Get an early start to beat the tour buses, and be sure to take a boat ride on the river to see the splendid Fangsheng Bridge, Zhujiajiao's five-span centrepiece, which dates from the late 16th century.

Shanghai

At the mouth of the Yangtze River, Shanghai became the hub of European imperial ambitions in mainland China after the Opium Wars, and today is the powerhouse of a dramatic economic revolution. Double-digit growth over the past decade has added over 4,000 skyscrapers to its futuristic skyline (twice the number of New York's). Giant TV screens, neon-lit malls and 10-lane expressways have become emblematic of the downtown area, whose big-name designer boutiques and supercar showrooms are striking reminders of China's new affluence.

Monuments to Shanghai's previous mega-boom, which transformed the city during the 1920s, abound along the Bund, the iconic walkway lining the Huangpu River. The best place in the city to get your bearings, this breezy promenade backed by stately, old Neo-Classical and Art Deco buildings faces the dramatic skyline of Pudong across the water – a mesmerizing spectacle around sunset when the twinkling lights of its innumerable tower blocks are reflected in the water.



Fairmont Peace Hotel

'Impeccable' is the word most often used to describe the Fairmont Peace Hotel, whose distinctive green pyramidal roof has been a landmark on Shanghai's Bund since it was built in 1929 by the property and textile tycoon Victor Sassoon. Overlooking the Huangpu River, with sweeping views of Nanjing Road and Pudong across the water, the hotel was intended in its day to be the most beautiful east of Suez, and for many it still is, thanks to the enduringly glamorous Art Deco grandeur, gracious service and breathtakingly beautiful interiors. Don't miss the house jazz band (average age 70) which has been serenading guests here for 88 years.

Nanjing

One of the 'Four Great Ancient Capitals of China' and amongst its most attractive megacities, Nanjing (formerly known as 'Nanking'), on the Yangtze River, boasts a history stretching back 2,500 years, though its most impressive monuments date from the era of the Ming Dynasty. Foremost among these is the tomb of the emperor responsible for designating this as the imperial capital, Zhu Yuangzhang, which occupies pride of place on Zijin Shan (literally 'Purple Gold') Mountain, to the east of the city centre. Approached via a paved pathway flanked by polished marble statues of animals and attendants, the beautiful 14th-century complex, known as the Ming Xiaoling, is set amid fragrant woodland. On weekends, the nearby tomb of Dr Sun Yatsen (the first president of post-imperial China) draws the largest crowds, thanks to the expansive hilltop views over the metropolis to be had from the grand stone staircase leading to it.

Nanjing's busiest visitor attraction is the rather more sombre Massacre Memorial Museum. The atrocities that followed the fall of the city to the Japanese in 1937, when an estimated 300,000 people were slaughtered, are catalogued in displays of black-and-white photographs and half-buried skeletal remains, set in a starkly modern, but very moving, complex.

Prize exhibit among the numerous national treasures in the city's excellent history museum is a famous mural of the seven *Sages of the Bamboo Grove*, rendered on molded bricks.



Hangzhou

Another ancient city within easy range of Shanghai, and which beguiles for its idyllic scenery and atmospheric architecture, is Hangzhou. Strategically situated on the Grand Canal connecting the Yangtze and Yellow River basins, it became the imperial capital in the 12th and 13th centuries, when Marco Polo described it as 'the most beautiful and magnificent (city) in the world'.

A wonderful collection of shrines, tombs, temples and pagodas adorn the willow-lined shores of Xi Hu, or 'West Lake', Hangzhou's pride and joy, where you can cycle or stroll along medieval backroads, passing groves of bamboo and old humpback bridges to reach outlying villages.

Worthwhile excursions include a trip to the Wunlin Mountains on the northwestern outskirts to visit the splendid Lingyin Temple, one of the largest and wealthiest Buddhist shrines in the country, where a massive golden Buddha is the principal object of veneration, and the pretty precinct of Tunxi, 130 miles to the southwest, whose thousand-year old, flagstone-lined high street is one of the best sources of authentic souvenirs.



Huangshan

Immortalized in countless Chinese ink paintings, the distinctive granite landscapes of the Huangshan mountain range, in Anhui Province, cast a powerful spell. Soaring above dense bamboo forest and rugged, vertical-sided canyons, are ranks of pinnacles and razor ridges capped by solitary, wind-bent pines and Buddhist temples. A network of paths wriggles around the cliffs and gullies, often enveloped with swirling mist, to reach these seemingly inaccessible monuments, to which pilgrims have ascended for centuries.

We recommend clients spend a night in one of the hilltop hotels, which will leave you perfectly placed for sunrise, when a rose-coloured sea of cloud carpets the valleys below, leaving the granite towers and peaks of the Huangshan massif standing proud in crimson sunlight.

Xidi & Hongcun

Close to Huangshan range, these two picture-postcard market towns in South Anhui were founded in the Song era of the 11th century, and reached their peak of prosperity under the Qing and Ming dynasties in the 18th and 19th centuries, from when most of their architecture dates. Of the two, Xidi is the least commercialized, with 124 courtyard residences and numerous clan halls lining its narrow, winding, mossy lanes. Sporting traditional scarlet paper lanterns, all have been preserved as they would have looked a hundred or more years ago, down to their richly carved wood gables and antique interiors – a treat for lovers of Chinese period style. Many of the scenes for Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* were shot in and around nearby Hongcun.



Jingdezhen pottery

"As white as jade, as thin as paper, as bright as a mirror, as tuneful as a bell" is how a famous Chinese saying described the porcelain produced at Jingdezhen. Although producing pottery since the sixth century, its porcelain gained fame in the 10th to 12th century Song era, and became the country's ceramics capital in 1369, when a Ming imperial kiln was first installed, the remains of which are now preserved in one of the town's museums. This was the principal source of the fine, blueish-white glazed china vases and tea sets which became obligatory accoutrements for well-to-do European households in the 17th century. They continue to be made here today though most is now destined for domestic consumption.



Tea in China

Wars have been fought over it, and the fortunes of empires decided by its trade. But the humble tea plant, *Carmellia sinensis*, was for thousands of years an exclusively Chinese commodity, grown, drunk and sold according to rules first set down in the first millennium BC, and little altered since.

It was to break China's monopoly over the leaf - or more accurately, the Qing Emperors' refusals to swap it for goods rather than gold - that led the British to flood the country with Indian-grown opium in the 19th century, producing millions of addicts and provoking two bloody wars.

In the end, though, an act of daring subterfuge by a gardener from Berwickshire proved the undoing of the world's most closely guarded horticultural secret. In 1848, aptly named Robert Fortune was sent by the East India Company to the forbidden interior of southern China to find out all he could about tea production. Disguised as a Mandarin, complete with waist-length pigtail and silk robes, the young Scot toured plantations and factories across Fujian, Jiangsu and Guangdong. After a few failed attempts, he eventually succeeded in smuggling a shipload of seedlings to the Himalayan foothills of India, where they thrived.

Tea continues to be enjoyed in 21st century China, where it is regarded as one of the 'seven necessities for starting the day' (along with 'rice, oil, salt, firewood, soy sauce and vinegar'). It is drunk in many varied forms, most commonly 'green'. Wander around any modern Chinese city and you'll still see numerous traditional tea shops, where local people linger for hours over tiny white porcelain cups. This way of consuming tea, in leaf form and brewed in pots, originated in the 14th century, when the Ming Emperor Hongwin decreed that all tributes of tea should be presented in leaf form rather than the compressed bricks which had dominated the trade since the Tang era (and which continued to be carried across Yunnan on the backs of porters to Lhasa via the old Horse Tea Route until the 1940s).

On formal occasions, it is also drunk in elaborate tea ceremonies, similar to those practised in Japan, where every aspect of the brewing, drinking and utensil placement is codified according to ancient rules of etiquette. One requires the dainty curling of the little finger - thought to be the origins of the "raised pinky" beloved of highborn ladies in Jane Austen's day.





Hong Kong

Hong Kong - 'Fragrant Harbour' - was Britain's first toehold on the Chinese coast and, as one of the world's leading financial centres, remains firmly at the interface of East and West: an economic powerhouse, a cultural melting pot and an enthralling city to explore. Gazing across Victoria Harbour at the famous cityscape today, with its ranks of skyscrapers receding into the misty hills behind, and junks bobbing around the choppy grey-green bay in the foreground, it's hard to comprehend that a little over a century and a half ago, this most recognizable of waterfronts was merely a 'barren rock' off China's south coast.

Boats are still very much part of the local scene, but there's plenty to explore on dry land. Follow the aroma of incense to discover a Taoist temple; duck out of the rain into a steaming noodle canteen or dim sum restaurant for an unforgettably delicious meal. Or jump on a ferry to the settlement of Aberdeen, where sampans dodge among the trawlers in the harbour, and fishermen in conical hats preside over piles of exotic seafood, from jellyfish tentacles to crabs the size of tennis rackets.



The Peak

The rattly old Victorian funicular railway ascending HK's famous Peak started life in 1888, as a means of transporting colonial settlers desperate for a break from the heat. It now shuttles 7 million passengers every year - at a hair-raising gradient - to the complex at the famous hilltop, featuring Madame Tussaud's and the distinctive Peak Tower. The finest views are to be had from the Sky Terrace 428, the highest viewing deck in the city, which overlooks the whole harbour and distant skyscrapers of Kowloon.



Victoria Harbour

This superbly sheltered deepwater anchorage dividing Hong Kong and Kowloon is what initially attracted British traders to the area during the Opium Wars of the 1830s and 1840s, and it remains among the world's busiest seaways. For a vista you'll never forget, take a stroll along the Avenue of Stars in Tsim Sha Tsui - a promenade in the style of Hollywood's Walk of Fame, built to honour heroes of the Hong Kong film industry - from where you can take in an awesome sweep of the city, a panorama most impressive just after sunset, when a million lights illuminate the skyscrapers and backdrop of jungle-covered mountains.



Outlying Islands

One of the great things about Hong Kong is that it's easy to escape. The city's cheap, green-and-white Star Ferries chug day and night across the harbour, and are an enjoyable way to experience the famous cityscape.

Among the largest of the Outlying Islands is Lamma, where there are some beautiful beaches, great seafood restaurants and trails leading into the hills to small temples. A salty, old-world atmosphere pervades the fishing dock and market at Cheung Chau, jam-packed with sampans and dilapidated wooden junks. Alternatively, jump on the metro to Lantau Island to visit the impressive Tian Tan Buddha, a 26-metre (85-foot) tall bronze statue sitting cross-legged on a hilltop. Nestling on the shoreline below, Tai O is a fishing village on stilts where you can order grilled baby cuttlefish or shredded squid and other local delicacies straight off the boat.

If you're here in May, don't miss the famous Bun Festival on tiny Cheung Chau Island, when three 18m (60ft) towers of bamboo are erected and covered in cakes. Locals compete to see who can seize the highest bun, as lion and dragon dances take place below.



Macau

Macau, on the opposite side of the mouth of the Pearl River from Hong Kong, has for more than a century been eclipsed by its more prosperous cousin across the water. But this former Portuguese colony is making a comeback thanks to its liberal gambling laws. Punters from mainland China (where gambling is banned) flock here for a flutter in one of the Vegas-style mega casinos springing up across the city, and to pose for selfies in front of the spectacular Baroque Church of St Paul. Nearby Kaiping is famous for the 1,800 or so castle-like towers scattered across the surrounding rice fields. Originally built in the Ming era to protect settlements from bandits, these quirky structures were later erected by local émigré families to show off their wealth. Many can be climbed for delightful views over the adjacent farming villages.



Xiamen

Known in colonial times as 'Amoy', Xiamen is the most approachable, well-groomed city on China's eastern seaboard, and one filled with fascinating vestiges of the 19th century, when traders from Japan and Europe settled here in large numbers. The low-rise enclave behind the seafont, with its restored Neoclassical villas and winding backstreets, is a delight to explore on foot, while pretty Gulangyu Island, across the straits, holds numerous old residences recently designated as UNESCO World Heritage monuments.



Tulou Houses of Yongding County

A two-hour drive inland from Xiamen, the verdant mountainsides of Yongding County, in southwest Fujian Province, are renowned for their extraordinary clan houses, belonging to the Hakka and Minnan minorities whose heartland this has been since the 12th century. Known as 'tulou' in Mandarin, these circular, Colosseum-like structures are made of earthquake-proof rammed earth, and formerly accommodated up to eight hundred people each. Their residents occupied small rooms ranged in concentric rings around a central courtyard, entered via ironclad doorways.

The larger tulou incorporate clan shrines, school rooms, communal kitchens and animal stalls into their layout, as well as granaries and wells. Outmigration to nearby cities has left many of these venerable old buildings half empty, as younger clan members opt for the conveniences and comforts of modern apartment living. But a few have recently been renovated as visitor destinations, including one of the largest and most warrenous at Chengqi Lou, which measures over 60m (200ft) in diameter and boasts an amazing 402 rooms.

Beaches of Hainan



Known as 'the Tail of the dragon', Hainan Island in China's southernmost province is synonymous with sun, sand, turquoise water and good times. Every Chinese who can afford the luxury, wishes to spend a holiday relaxing on its golden beaches, lapped year-round by warm surf. The resulting resort construction has altered some stretches of the shoreline. But with a crop of sophisticated boutique hotels springing up at more secluded locations on quieter stretches of coast, Hainan still offers you the best options for a beach stay at the end of a tour. On the same latitude as northern Vietnam, the island boasts a subtropical climate that's warm and humid between June and October, and drier and sunnier over the winter months.



Mandarin Oriental, Sanya

Suave contemporary design meets Balinese boutique chic at this effortlessly stylish resort in Sanya, on the southern tip of Hainan. Polished hardwoods and shimmering silk combine to create a luxurious ambience in the rooms. You've three achingly pretty outdoor pools to choose from, and a glorious beach on the doorstep - along with a brace of world-class golf courses within easy reach. And it's all set against a backdrop of forested mountains.



Banyan Tree, Sanya

Overlooking beautiful Luhuitou Bay on the southernmost tip of Hainan Island, this heavenly boutique resort consists entirely of pool villas, set around a tropical lagoon amid lush, bird-filled gardens. The architecture is sleek and modern, and offers exceptional privacy. Savour the sea breezes from your own exclusive pool. In-villa dining is a speciality: staff deliver meals (including fresh local seafood) to your door and set up full silverware service on your veranda - a real treat.



Anantara, Sanya

If you want a luxurious, romantic spot on the beach to while away a few days during your China tour, look no further than this dreamy resort on the headland to the south of Sanya. Dotted around tropical gardens overlooking Yulong Harbour, the hotel's exclusive suites and pool villas have an earthy elegance, with teak floors, deep terrazzo bathtubs and breezy balconies. We love the location, the wonderful seafood and professionalism of the staff at this beautiful beach hideaway.



Raffles, Clearwater Bay

Raffles' splendid five-star resort is located on Clearwater Bay, the most fabulous beach on the entire South China Sea coastline. It's tucked away, but no matter: you won't want to leave when you see how gorgeous it is. Everything you might want for an indulgent, revitalizing stay is on site. We always recommend clients pay a little extra for a room on one of the upper storeys, from where the sunrise views are out of this world. This is also the only resort in the area situated next to two championship golf courses!



Guilin & the Li River

Featured on ancient scroll paintings, Ming porcelain vases and the modern 20-Yuan note, the karst mountains of Guangxi province rise at surreal gradients from the limpid green waters of the Li River – a landscape that has for centuries epitomized the exotic grandeur of southern China’s rural heartland. All year-round, a fleet of small cruisers shuttle visitors along the waterway, offering one of the country’s great definitive travel experiences. Glimpses of bucolic rural China punctuate the journey: buffalo grazing in the fields, farmers toiling in waterlogged paddy or paddling to market in home-made canoes, laden with vegetables and sacks of rice. The area is particularly famous for its cormorant fishermen. Working from punted rafts, using lanterns to entice the fish to the surface, local men train birds to dive into the water and return with the catch in their beaks.



Yangshuo

The main hub for the Li River is Yangshuo (‘Bright Moon’), a lively riverside village with a crop of Ming-era houses and bustling market area where you can stock up on local souvenirs and people watch in the open-air cafés. Enfolded by some of the area’s most spectacular karst hills, it makes a great springboard for walks in the surrounding countryside, which offer superb views over the valley.

A great way to explore the magical countryside and pretty villages around Yangshuo is to cycle. We can arrange for quality bikes and an English-speaking guide to lead you via peaceful, traffic-free backlanes and paddy fields to traditional farming hamlets. A particular favourite of ours is Jiuxian, which has retained many of its Ming-era houses, complete with antique, grey, mud-brick walls, red-tiled roofs and carved-wood doors.

The Liu San Jie light show & Reed Flute Cave

Created by the team responsible for the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Liu San Jie is son et lumière as you’ve never seen it. More than 600 local actors in vibrant costumes appear in the extravaganza, which is staged after dark, along the riverfront, with the mountains of Yangshuo as a backdrop. Myriads of lanterns are deployed to create a spectacle on a truly grand scale.

Another extraordinary spectacle in the area is the Reed Flute Cave – with a wondrous array of stalactites and stalagmites, lit in memorable fashion using multi-coloured lights and projections. Inscriptions painted on the cave walls in the late 8th century prove the caverns have been a visitor attraction for over 1,200 years. Today, visits are well spaced out so the complex never gets too crowded.



Longji & the 'Dragon's Backbone' Rice Terraces

Around 95 miles (150km) north of Guilin city in Longsheng county, the slopes below Longji Titian ('Dragon's Backbone') mountain have been moulded across the centuries into narrow rice terraces that hug the folds and contours of the hillsides. In springtime, when filled with irrigation water, they appear as bands of silver and terracotta; in summer, they're vibrant green; and during the autumn harvest season, golden brown.

The perfect base from which to admire this extraordinary landscape is a homestay in a traditional Zhuang village, such as Ping An or Dazhai, whose wooden farmhouses are separated by narrow cobbled lanes, and where you can savour the amazing views at breakfast time over a cup of steaming, sweet 'oil tea'.

The local Zhuang farmers, who still work the terraces using horse-drawn ploughs, are charming hosts. This area is also homeland of the Red Yao minority, whose womenfolk grow their hair to extraordinary lengths, and wear it coiled in fabulous ornamental headdresses. As well as rice, the local diet is heavily reliant on fish - farmed in the irrigation ditches.



Li-An Lodge, Longji

No other lodge can compete with the Li-An for views of the famous rice terraces. Access is on foot (or sedan chair if you're slow on your pins). After a winding approach by car, you begin a short but steep uphill climb to Ping An village, with porters carrying your suitcases on their backs - effort rewarded with spectacular panoramas across the valley. Each of the rooms in the wood-lined, slate-roofed lodge are individually styled by owner, Keren, whose beautiful calligraphy and photos adorn the walls. They're warm, clean, cosy and tranquil, and perfectly placed for walks through the surrounding paddy fields.

The Dong Villages

West of Longji, the main road winds through the heart of Dong country towards Guizhou Province. Aside from some rustic scenery, the route takes you through one of the most culturally fascinating corners of Asia, where a host of different minority groups survive, their dark-wood villages clinging to winding cobbled lanes amid steep, fastidiously terraced hillsides.

The Dong people are particularly renowned for their architecture, as exemplified by the area's largest town, Sanjiang, a couple of hours' drive from Longsheng, where a splendid 47m tall drum tower dominates the old stone roofscape. Another hallmark of this area are elaborate river bridges surmounted by multi-storeyed pagoda roofs. A prime example is the Wind and Rain Bridge at the village of Chengyang, on the Linxi River to the north of Sanjiang - a vision from a bygone world. Traditional opera troupes often perform here in the evenings.



Kaili

Kaili, in the southeast of Guizhou Province, is capital city of the Miao (aka H'mong) minority. A large, modern city, it holds little of more than passing interest in itself, but its hotels serve as useful stopovers when travelling across the minority belt that runs east through the hills into Guangxi province.

The surrounding countryside has a large number of Miao villages where you can experience minority life at close quarters. Most have been heavily commercialized in recent years, but our guides know how to sidestep the more frequented settlements close to the highways in favour of villages such as Langde, where many women still wear traditional dress and farmers irrigate the fields with old-style bamboo water wheels.



Shidong & the Dragon Boat Festival

A village we recommend to anyone hoping to avoid the kind of commercialism that mars so many Miao settlements these days is Shidong, in Taijiang County. Once a prosperous trading post on the Qungshui River, in February it hosts the famous 'Sisters' Meal Festival', in which young local women don their finest silverware and pleated, embroidered skirts to perform a series of elaborate rituals and dances with the aim of attracting a potential partner. Unmarried men flock in to present parcels of sticky rice to girls that may have caught their eye, and these are returned with a set of chopsticks if the attraction is mutual (or a red-hot chilli if not!). The event is accompanied by buffalo fights, horse races, drumming recitals and lots of playing of bamboo lusheng pipes.



On the 24th day of the fifth lunar month (which usually falls in May, Shidong hosts another famous event, the 'Dragon Boat Festival' when, to pray for a successful harvest, giant fir tree trunks are carved into ceremonial canoes, decorated with flags and spectacular dragon-shaped mastheads, and raced by teams of 36 oarsmen in traditional garb - a superb spectacle. A cacophony of drums and gongs accompanies the progress of the boats along the river.



Ethnic Minorities

Southwest China

Modern China straddles vastly different worlds, and nowhere exemplifies this better than the southwestern provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou, which together hold the largest number of minority groups in the country. The region's rugged terrain explains why traditional ways of life have survived here as robustly as they have. Despite having been suppressed by the Red Guards in the 1960s, many are today experiencing a revival, thanks to tourism.

There are 56 officially recognized minority groups in China, and hundreds of subgroups. They range in size from a few hundred thousand to several million, but all retain their own languages and dialects, religious rituals, festivals, arts, crafts and - most conspicuously - traditional forms of dress.

The Miao are the most vibrant of all, thanks to the colourfully embroidered clothes and silver jewellery worn by the women. Dispersed across southern Yunnan and Guizhou, they tend to be categorized into subgroups according to their attire: 'Flowerly Miao', 'Red Miao', 'Black Miao', 'Short-skirt Miao' and 'Long-skirt Miao' being the main groups.

Further north, around Dali and Lake Erhai, the principal minority are the Bai people, whose traditional dress consists of long-sleeved white shirts worn with elegant sleeveless jackets, baggy blue or black trousers and elaborate headgear. They are equally famous for their tea ceremony, san dao cha, which consists of three rounds: one bitter; one sweet; and the third, featuring slices of Sichuan pepper, cassia, ginger and honey, for 'reflection'.

Equally arcane and culturally sophisticated are the traditions of the Naxi, who live mostly around Lijiang in Yunnan. Descended from Tibetan traders who entered the region more than a thousand years ago, the Naxi practise their own unique Shamanic form of Buddhism called Dongba, based around obscure divination rites. While exploring the villages you'll occasionally come across a resplendently costumed Oracle, wearing flowing appliqué robes and striking crown with a flute in his hand. Drawn from traditions of the Han and Tang Dynasties, music is central to Naxi life. One of the great experiences of Lijiang is attending a performance by a local Dongjing orchestra, with its ensemble of ancient instruments.

In recent decades, fascination has grown in mainstream China for such exotic spectacles, and tourism in some minority regions has become big business. However, our local guides know how to sidestep the commercialized villages in favour of others where TransIndus clients can visit traditional family farmsteads, share meals, help in the fields and, if desired, overnight in simple homestays for a more authentic experience of minority life.





Yunnan

For Chinese people, 'Yunnan' represents everything that's most exotic about their own country. Bordered by Tibet, Myanmar (Burma), Laos and Vietnam, the province encompasses extraordinary geographic extremes: ice peaks, rice terraces, jaw-dropping mountain gorges, high-altitude grasslands and moist subtropical forests full of rare plants and flowers. It also retains a wealth of historic towns, foremost among them Dali and Lijiang, on the old Tea Horse trade route to Lhasa, where large concentrations of antique houses and temples have been painstakingly restored, recreating the refined atmosphere of the Ming and Qing eras. Ethnic minorities such as the Naxi and Bai have a high profile in both, and in the much warmer southern half of the state where, after decades of suppression, traditional ways of life are being revived, making this one of the most culturally engaging regions to explore. However, Yunnan's burgeoning popularity, especially among domestic visitors, means it's essential to venture a little off track here if you wish to experience the landscape and culture without the crowds. In the following few pages we identify our favourite places to do this.



Dali

Set amid breathtaking scenery on the shores of shimmering Erhai Lake, Dali is the China of the imagination – where pagoda towers nose above skylines of clay-tile roofs, and ancient cobbled streets are framed by willow trees and a serene backdrop of cloud-swept summits. At the foot of Cangshan ('Green Mountains'), it is the capital of the Bai minority, and between the 8th and the 13th centuries served as the seat of the Nanzhao and Dali dynasties, whose antique temples and gateways still dominate the Old Town.

Dali's historic patina and ethnic colour have made it a popular retreat for middle-class Chinese seeking a taste of the old world, which has given rise to a lively bar and coffee-shop scene. The ancient character of the city, however, still stands to the fore, especially in the markets and along the main street, Benmin Lu, where Bai stallholders in traditional dress squat beside displays of silverware, embroidery and freshly cut flowers.

Aimless wandering is very much the order of the day in old Dali. Don't miss the exquisite 'Three Pagodas' complex, whose iconic towers, reflected to magical effect in an ornamental pond, have survived a millennia of wars and earthquakes. Further afield, the lakeshore shelters a string of pretty traditional villages where you can watch cormorant fishermen at work, and strike out on walks into the Cangshan mountains to hot springs and hidden monasteries.



Linden Centre, Xizhou (Dali)

Crouched close to the western shore of Lake Erhai, this boutique guest house ranks among our favourite places to stay in China. It was founded by American expats, Brian and Jeanee Linden, who spent 4 years renovating a charismatic old manor just outside Dali. Beautiful antiques, textiles and local crafts enliven the interiors, and Bai musicians and dancers from the village perform recitals in the central courtyard. During the day you can go for horse-cart rides through the surrounding ricefields, watch cormorant fishing by the lake, or just relax over a game of mahjong back at the lodge. Classes in local Bai cuisine, music, calligraphy and painting are also on offer. Far more than just a beautiful place to stay, the Linden Centre is an inspirational way to learn more about this unique part of the world.



Lijiang

The vision of the Jade Dragon Mountain's eternal snowfields shining above the elegantly upcurved, pantiled rooftops of Lijiang is one of the most evocative in China. An important waystage on the old Tea Horse Road, the town emerged a thousand years ago as the capital of the Naxi people, originally settlers from Tibet who still

preserve their own Shamanic religious practises and unique pictographic script. The twin allures of Lijiang's spellbinding backdrop and postcard pretty old town, with its winding watercourses of babbling meltwater, have made it the most popular visitor attraction in Yunnan. Even so, it's well worth braving the crowds to experience the

beautiful UNESCO-listed architecture, and its serene backdrop of snow peaks. The timbered buildings, elaborately carved window frames, winding cobbled streets, Ming-era humpbacked bridges and secluded market squares are at their most picturesque in the early mornings before the tourist buses descend.



The Tea Horse Road

For over a thousand years, from the time of the Tang dynasty in the 7th century AD until the advent of the diesel engine in the 20th, a thriving trade route crossed the mountains and gorges of Yunnan. Stretching for around 1,400 miles, it formed the main artery connecting China and Tibet – two adversaries who despite their mutual antipathy both had something the other needed.

In one direction, bricks of low-grade Chinese tea were carried from the markets of Pu'er in southern Yunnan to the Tibetan capital, Lhasa. There, the tea would be exchanged for war horses, which the Chinese emperors bought to help repel the nomadic hordes threatening their northwestern borders. At

its peak, an estimated 25,000 horses were sold each year along the caravan route, known in Chinese as 'Chama Guado'. Each fetched a price of 130 pounds of tea, at a rate fixed by the imperial authorities.

Sewn into hides of waterproof yak skins, the bricks of compressed tea were mostly carried on the backs of porters wearing little more than rags and straw sandals. Heaving more than their own body weight, they braved snowstorms and bandits to cross the world's highest ranges. Of the old cobbled pathways they followed, only a few stretches survive, in the upper Nujiang (Salween) and Lacang (Mekong) gorges, close to the modern border of Yunnan. The rest have long since been tarmacked over.

The Shaxi Valley

A 90-minute drive along the new highway from Dali and Lijiang, the Shaxi Valley lies on the route of the old Tea Horse Road connecting Yunnan with Tibet and Myanmar (Burma). Screened by forested mountain ridges, the vale retains some of the best preserved period architecture in the entire region, in villages populated mainly by members of the Yi and Bai minorities.

If you're wondering what southwest China must have been like 15 or 20 years ago, this pocket of Tang-era elegance will provide some pointers. A preservation order has been placed on the entire area prohibiting modern construction and as a consequence, its settlements remain superbly picturesque, featuring traditional whitewashed farmsteads and courtyard houses with upswept eaves and tiled roofs, nestled beside rivers spanned by humpbacked bridges.

At the centre of the largest village, a painted wooden temple and old theatre stage dominate a cobbled square lined with cafés and pretty artisanal souvenir shops. Every five days, Bai people dressed in traditional garb descend with bamboo baskets on their backs to buy and sell fresh produce here.

Stay in Shaxi and you'll also be able to make the memorable hike up nearby Shibaoshan, a sacred mountain to the north, where string of ancient temples and shrines are connected by forest trails. Horse treks through local villages and a friendly cookery school where you can learn to make *jiaozi* dumplings, Yunnanese pastries and other local specialities, provide additional incentive to extend your stay.



Old Theatre Inn, Shaxi

Shaxi has a very special atmosphere, and this heritage property on the north side of the valley is perfectly set up to make the most of it. Housed, as the name suggests, in an antique courtyard theatre, the complex is dominated by a traditional, raised stage, surmounted by curvy roofs and carved beams. The rooms are beautifully furnished in traditional style, with luxurious beds and wood-panelled walls. For us, the highlight of a stay here is to sit at sunset time on the terrace outside, sipping fragrant Yunnan tea as the fieldworkers and livestock make their way home through the surrounding rice terraces and a local Bai orchestra begins to play on the stage.



The Three Parallel Gorges Region

Although their mouths flow into different oceans many thousands of miles apart, three of Asia's greatest rivers – the Yangtze, Mekong and Salween – run close together for 200km in Yunnan, separated by huge mountains. The scale of the gorges they have created is hard to comprehend: all are over 3,000m deep (twice the depth of the Grand Canyon), and flanked by peaks approaching 7,000m (the height of the Andes). Due to their relative isolation, these valleys have nurtured unique species of flora and fauna, many of which were unknown to the western world until the expeditions of the legendary plant hunter and explorer, Joseph Rock, in the 1920s. Yunnan snub-nosed monkeys and snow leopard are two of the species that survive amid the extensive birch, fir and rhododendron forests of the region, along with rare red pandas and the elusive takin.

Since the advent of air travel to Shangri-La (Zhongdian), Lijiang and Dali, reaching the Three Parallel Gorges area has been relatively straightforward. But to explore it in any depth, we recommend setting aside at least a week, travelling by car between our recommended lodges, and striking out on foot for day walks accompanied by an English-speaking guide. The incentive: the chance to experience one of the last unspoilt, and most scenic, corners of Asia, where mass tourism is unknown and traditional life still holds sway among the local Tibetan, Bai, Yi and Lisu minorities.



Tiger Leaping Gorge Trek

An unmissable highlight of China's southwest for any keen hiker is the Tiger Leaping Gorge, or 'Hutiao Xia' in Mandarin. The canyon ranks among the deepest in the world, with walls rearing 3,720m (12,434ft) from the frothing, grey-brown waters of the Jinsha River to the snowy summits of the Haba Xueshan range.

Although a road has been carved along the gorge's lower flanks, the old footpath traversing its higher slopes offers a supremely memorable way to experience the area's scenery. It takes between 2 and 3 days to complete, spending the night in simple Naxi guest houses along the way, where you can wake up to a flask of steaming green tea and vista of ice peaks burnished with dawn sunlight.

Because of the constantly changing nature of the high trail, we always recommend clients are accompanied by an experienced local guide. We'll also arrange ponies to carry your luggage between stages, so you don't have to trek with a heavy backpack. Even so, some stretches of this trail are very steep, requiring a good degree of physical fitness.





Shangri-La

In the far north of Yunnan, the town of Shangri-La (or 'Zhongdian' as it used to be known) occupies a high, mountainous plateau on the fringes of Tibet. Snow-encrusted peaks, exotic lamaseries and grasslands dotted with herds of grazing yaks combine to create a magical atmosphere which, for once, is not marred by excessive visitor numbers – a rarity in China.

On the outskirts of the city, the great Songzanlin monastery is a spectacular edifice second only in stature to the Potala Palace in Lhasa. After a decade of painstaking renovation work by the provincial government, its gilded rooftops and vibrant murals have been restored to their former glory. Framed by a backdrop of scrub-covered ridges, the monastery is best viewed from the boardwalk encircling its adjacent lake. If you stay in our favourite hotel here, Songtsam Shangri-La Lodge, you'll be perfectly placed to view the monument before the day trippers descend.

Downtown, the prime attraction is Shangri-La's delightful 'Old Town' – a fine ensemble of traditional-style cafés, Tibetan clothes boutiques and souvenir shops that were completely rebuilt after a fire in 2014. Early risers may also wish to sample the magical atmosphere of the Baiji ('100 chicken') temple, on a hilltop overlooking the Old Town, where locals go en masse in the mornings to leave offerings of fresh juniper incense. Beyond Shangri-La city, the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Region holds great potential for off-track exploration, thanks to the handful of delightful, Tibetan-style lodges established in the surrounding valleys (see box).



Songtsam Lodges

To the north and west of Shangri-La lies some of the most spectacular landscape in China. A company called Songtsam has opened a chain of lodges in this unspoiled area, providing Tibetan-style luxury in spots chosen for their unique views. You can use them as bases for exploring secluded valleys, join guided trips to monasteries or to gather fruit and wild mushrooms with staff members and their families. The full circuit of Songtsam's five lodges can be completed in a varied trip of around 8 or 9 days; shorter tours focussing on one or two are also possible. Its scenic highlight is the spectacular Lacang (Mekong) Valley, where the waters of the Mekong crash through a trench almost 5km deep. Spellbinding views of Yunnan's highest mountain, Kawakarpo, are to be had from Songtsam Meili, close to the Tibetan border.



Sichuan

This province, or, to be more precise, the flat, circular 'Red Basin' forming its heartland, is the economic powerhouse of Western China. Thanks to a humid, subtropical climate and extraordinarily fertile soil, the region has long ranked among the country's most prosperous. The capital, Chengdu, serves an ideal introduction to its long history, with archaeological vestiges dating back over 4,000 years and a dazzlingly modern downtown district whose skyline is starting to resemble that of Manhattan. Most visitors generally pause here a night or two to see the panda bears. The breeding and research centres on the city's outskirts offer the chance to get close to dozens of adults and cubs. Some of China's most impressive rock-cut Buddhist sculptures also lie within the borders of this geographically diverse state, whose western half comprises a vast track of forested mountains - the edge of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. Two of China's most sacred mountains - Emeishan and Qingcheng shan - also lie with its borders and remain hugely popular tourist attractions. Most iconic of all Sichuan's landscapes, however, are the wondrous blue travertine pools of the Jiuzhai Valley - at their most resplendent in the autumn.



Chengdu

On the western edge of Sichuan's Red Basin, Chengdu is the largest city in Western China, with an ultra-modern, high-rise centre that belies its role as a regional capital for over 4,000 years. Brocaded silk from here found its way to the bazaars of ancient Rome, and the city's presses were the source of the world's first printed bank notes. Today, however, the Sichuan capital is best known as the bastion of China's beloved Giant Panda.

Between trips to see the bears, it's worth exploring the few precious pockets of traditional culture surviving amid all the modernity, notably around narrow, wood-fronted Jinli Street, where for a thousand years or more locals have come to play cards and mah-jong in delightful Ming-era teahouses. Settle into a bamboo chair and order a flask of jasmine tea, as plumes of steam from the samovars catch sunbeams streaming through the split-cane ceiling blinds. The street is also a great place to pick up traditional embroidery, lacquerwork, musical instruments and shadow puppets.

Close to Jinli Street, the Wuhou shrine is a rare architectural gem from Ming times, featuring koi ponds, willow groves and bonsai-studded rockeries in its precincts. Another vestige of Chengdu's past that's been beautifully restored is the Wide Lanes Narrow Lanes enclave, which comes alive after work hours, when locals and visitors flock to the bars and restaurants lining its stone-paved streets to see performances of traditional Sichuan Opera and 'Face Changing' shows by troupes of richly costumed actors and musicians. While you're in the neighbourhood, try a plate of Sichuan's famously tasty dumplings, spiced with red peppercorns.



Temple House, Chengdu

Nestled amid a phalanx of glass-sided skyscrapers at the heart of the city's trendiest shopping district, the Temple House is an artful fusion of antique and modern. Its entrance occupies a restored Qing-era building, complete with arched stone gateway flanked by half-timbered gables, but inside, minimalist modern architecture holds sway, with a palette of slate-grey and pale oak creating a soothing, sophisticated feel. Surveying a spectacular spread of skyscrapers, the rooms are ultrachic, with white leather sofas and spacious, black-marble-lined bathrooms. On the ground floor, don't miss the delightful Mi Xun Teahouse, a quirky café serving rare and fragrant brews from across China.





Giant Panda Base

The bamboo forests of southern Sichuan are the last stronghold of China's national treasure, the Giant Panda. Around 1,500 of these adorable black-and-white bears survive in the wild, but they're notoriously reclusive. For a guaranteed sighting, your best option is a visit to the famous Panda Breeding Base in the northern suburbs of Chengdu. Animal lovers should be reassured: this is nothing like a zoo. The 80-odd resident pandas roam around 24-hectares (600 acres) of beautiful wooded parkland resembling their native habitat - only fitted with climbing apparatus and feeding stations. The highlight is the nursery, where visitors can watch the fluffy baby bears being cared for by specially trained nursing staff or sleeping blissfully in communal cots.



Qingcheng shan

On the very edge of the Sichuan basin, where forested mountains of the Qinghai-Tibet plateau surge from the plains, the sacred Taoist peak of Qingcheng shan is just an hour from downtown Chengdu, but feels a world away. Ancient shrines dating from the time of the Tang dynasties nestle amid acres of beautiful old-growth forest on its slopes, interlaced by paved pathways. All, fine specimens of traditional architecture, its eleven principal temples mark places associated with the life and teachings of the philosopher Zhang Ling, first Celestial Master of Taoism.



Sanxingdui

Some remarkable remnants of Bronze Age China have recently come to light in the suburbs around Chengdu. At Sanxingdui, an hour north of the city on the banks of the Yazi River, fragments of bronze, jade and gold were discovered which, when reassembled, formed an outlandish mask with bulging eyes and a distinctive hooked nose. Carbon-dated to between the 12th and 11th centuries BC, human figures, dragons, weapons and clothes were also unearthed, along with a 4-metre-tall 'Spirit Tree' entwined by a mythical creature and human hands cast in bronze. Pick of the finds are exhibited in an impressive museum.

Six Senses. Qingcheng

Apart from providing a luxurious springboard for ascents of the nearby sacred mountain, this new resort on the leafy outskirts of Chengdu makes an ideal landing pad if you've just arrived on an international flight and don't feel like delving into the heart of the city. The entrance frames an idyllic view over the hotel's terracotta-tiled cottages and bamboo groves to the wooded hillsides beyond. All of the suites are styled with fragrant, pale hardwood and pistachio-coloured silk and canopied beds. Featuring Sichuanese, Cantonese and Shandong menus, as well as Western and Thai options, the food is gourmet standard.





Giant Buddha of Leshan

Seated imperiously, hands on knees, gazing at eternity through half-lidded eyes, the Giant Buddha of Leshan – or ‘Dafo’ as he’s known locally – was carved in the early 8th century from a red sandstone cliff overlooking the confluence of the Dadu, Qingyi and Min Rivers, around 111 miles (180km) southwest of Chengdu. The statue – the largest of its kind in the world – took 70 years to complete and pilgrims have been pouring in ever since to admire the colossus, who is these days smothered in lichen and ferns.



Emeishan

The other standout sacred site around Chengdu is Emeishan, the highest of China’s Four Sacred Mountains of Buddhism, which looms above the Dadu and Mu River confluence, 75 miles (120km) outside the city. A total of 76 Qing and Ming monasteries cluster around the three summits of this mist-shrouded massif, interconnected by a network of old stepped trails that wind through forests of twisted pines and waterfalls to the summit. A cable car also runs part of the way to the top, along with a government eco bus.

For clients wishing to undertake this memorable ascent on foot, we can provide English-speaking guides and arrange rooms in one of the hotels or guest houses that line the trekking route. It’s even possible to sleep close to the summit of Jin Ding (3,077m/10,095ft), one of Emei’s main peaks, allowing you to see the sublime spectacle of the sunrise over the clouds that form in the valley before dawn.



Jiuzhai Valley National Park

Enfolded by the snow peaks of the Minshan mountain range, the Jiuzhai Valley in southeastern Sichuan protects one of China’s signature landscapes, in which dozens of exquisite blue lakes are cradled by miles of empty forested hills. Believed to be the shards of a mirror belonging to the Tibetan goddess Semo, the lakes derive their impossibly beautiful colour from beds of travertine limestone, combined with the presence in the glacial water of rare blue-green algae. The spectacle entices streams of visitors here in the autumn, when the lakes are framed by dazzling displays of yellow and red leaves.

Huanglong

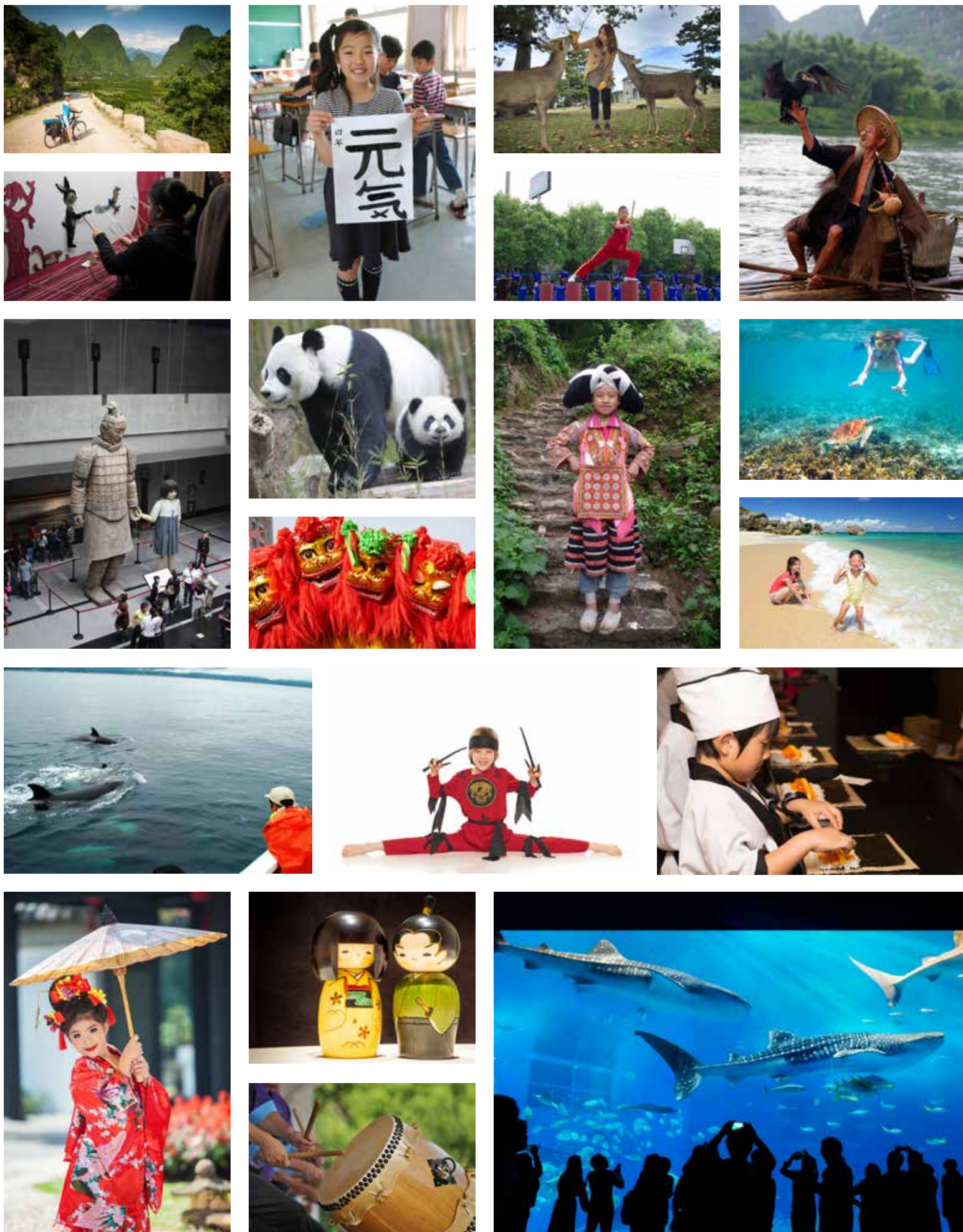
Nearly everyone who travels up to Jiuzhai from Chengdu also visits Huanglong. The name of this beautiful hidden valley means “Yellow Dragon”, a reference to the hundreds of travertine pools that snake, like scales of a giant dinosaur, down its floor. As at Jiuzhai, these form cascades of brilliant aquamarine ponds, enfolded by scallops of yellow calcite and superb old-growth pine forest, which stretches up the surrounding mountainsides to the vast snow-capped peaks of the Minshan range. You can ride a cable car to the head of the valley, where a lone Buddhist monastery nestles amid the scenic splendour – surely one of the most mystical spots in all Asia.



Dazu

One of the great wonders of ancient China lies hidden among the hills around Dazu, 125 miles (200km) east of Chengdu. Excavated between the 9th and 13th centuries AD, the UNESCO-listed cave sculptures here are regarded as the high-water mark of Chinese rock art because of their naturalistic style, graceful poses and superb ornamentation. Around 50,000 figures survive at half a dozen different sites, many of them forming narrative panels that recount religious myths and yield vivid, and often humorous, insights into life in China’s distant past – a fascinating fusion of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian styles.





Family Travel

Far East and Central Asia

Despite the sweeping social changes of recent decades, life still revolves squarely around the family in the Far East. One of the great delights for parents of travelling in the region is that children, especially foreign ones, attract considerably more attention than they tend to back home, helping to break the ice and oil the wheels of interaction with local people.

China and Japan are as full of wonder for youngsters as they are for grown-ups. In a typical 3-week trip to the former, you can wow your offspring with the Terracotta Army in Xi'an, take a raft ride on the Li River to watch cormorant fishermen at work, coo over the baby pandas in Chengdu and still have time for a bucket-and-spade break on Hainan Island at the end of your tour.

Japan is a particularly great destination for older children. Tokyo is the home of the fabulous Studio Ghibli Museum, one of the most vibrant and inspirational visitor attractions for young people anywhere in the world, while further south you've the samurai castles of Honshu (with their Ninja connections and tatedo sword fighting demonstrations) and wonderful beaches of Okinawa to relax on. Energetic youngsters will also enjoy the challenges of trekking in the Japan Alps and kayaking around Miyajima island, not to mention the experience of travelling on the famous bullet train and dressing up in traditional Japanese garb in ryokan inns.

Whatever your destination you will, of course, have plenty of exposure to everyday life, and in our experience markets and villages have been every bit as memorable for children as the formal attractions and planned activities. In Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan, for example, holidays invariably include stays in traditional yurt camps, where there will be kids the same age as yours, and where you'll get to watch horses being herded and milked, ride across vast grasslands and deserts during the day, and gaze at some of the world's clearest, starriest skies at night.

And don't worry about the food. Our partners on the ground are well used to catering for unadventurous, young palettes – even in remote felt yurts. So if you're looking for a holiday that will both broaden their horizons and leave long-lasting memories, this part of the world is a perfect choice.

Our favourite family-friendly experiences in the Far East & Central Asia

- Watch a shadow puppet performance in Beijing.
- Make your own Terracotta Warrior at the Terracotta Warrior and Horses Museum.
- Take a family bicycle ride through the ricefields and dramatic karst landscapes of Guilin.
- Watch the cuddly young bears at play in Chengdu's Panda Breeding and Research Centre.
- Take a Kung Fu class at the Shaolin Temple near Dengfeng.
- "Let's Get Lost Together" is the motto of the magical, maze-like Studio Ghibli Museum in Tokyo.
- Visit Tokyo's Kidzania, where children play at the jobs of adults.
- Try your hand at taiko drumming or take a Manga drawing class in Kyoto.
- Book an exclusive kashikiri-buro session for your family to soak in a private onsen tub together.
- Obstacle courses, jungle gyms and trick rooms with trap doors feature in the wonderful Ninja themed Kids Park in Nagano Prefecture.
- At the Iwatayama Monkey Park in Arashiyama people are in cages and monkeys roam free!
- Try your hand at Kokeshi doll painting in the Tohoku region.
- Feed the deer in Nara Park after a visit to the city's amazing museum.
- Marvel at the whale sharks and giant Pacific manta rays in Osaka's aquarium.
- Ride on horseback and camp under the stars on an equestrian trek around the pristine grasslands and glacial lakes of Kyrgyzstan.
- Visit reindeer herders in the remote north of Mongolia.

Exploring China

China is so vast that it's simply impossible to see everything the country has to offer in a single trip. That said, the advent of efficient, wide-ranging domestic air travel has made it feasible to cover an amazing amount of ground in the course of a typical two or three-week holiday. On these pages we feature our favourite tours, taking in both the big highlights and some lesser known gems.

When to Go | China's weather varies widely between regions. While, for example, winter temperatures in the far northern province of Dongbei (Manchuria) are cold enough for an ice festival in January-February, down in the far south it may be warm enough to lie on the beach. Most of the country, however, experiences a typical northern hemisphere split of chilly, misty winters and hot, humid summers. Rain is possible at any time of year, except in the western deserts, where it can remain dry for years. For experiencing landscapes, spring and autumn are the recommended periods. Apart from the weather, another reason to travel in shoulder season is that during the summer months the most popular visitor attractions can become uncomfortably crowded.

International Flights | British Airways operates direct services to Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Chengdu from Heathrow. From Manchester and Edinburgh, KLM and Air France fly to China via Amsterdam/Paris, or you can go with Cathay Pacific to Hong Kong. Another option is Tianjin Airline's direct service to Chongqing - ideal for clients wishing to start or end with a Yangtze cruise. Our consultants will be happy to advise you on the most cost effective flights for your chosen itinerary.

Travel Within China | China's ever expanding domestic air network is world-class, allowing you to reach even far-flung corners of the country with ease. Where flights are not available, the railway invariably offers a comfortable and efficient alternative. On par with Japan when it comes to train speeds and standards of service, the country has a larger high-speed rail network than the rest of the world put together. For shorter stages of your itinerary, we use private, air-conditioned cars. You'll be accompanied at all times by your guide, who will also act as your interpreter. Except in remote rural areas, road surfaces are of a very high standard, as are the vehicles themselves. Travelling by car, of course, gives you greater freedom and is particularly recommended for keen photographers as it allows you to pause when and where you wish.

Accommodation | Both the range and quality of hotels and guest houses in China has increased dramatically over the past decade, especially in large towns and cities, and in popular tourist destinations. Elsewhere, choice may be more limited. Wherever you travel though, you can rest assured all the accommodation we use has been regularly vetted by us and offers the highest possible levels of comfort in any given location. Our expert staff will be able to advise you on the best options for your itinerary and budget.



Suggested Itineraries

As with all our tailor-made trips, the routes outlined on these pages should only be considered as starting blocks, to be adapted according to your individual needs. It's common, for example, to tack two or three days of beach time at the end of an itinerary with a stay in a coastal resort on

Hainan Island. Or you might wish to make a detour to northern Yunnan to experience the fabulous mountain landscapes and region's ethnic minority culture. With a bit of logistical help from our expert holiday designers in London, an amazing range of options are available.

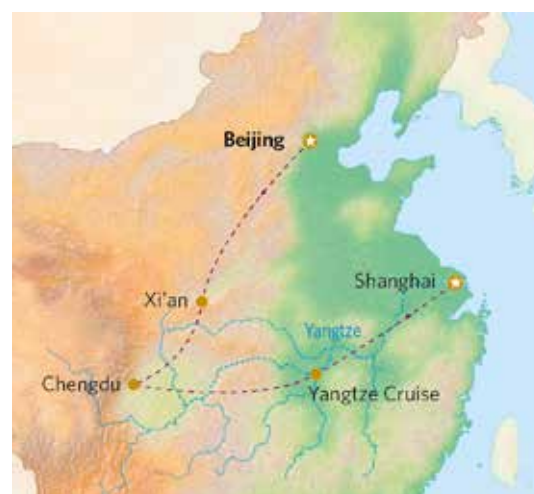
Essential China | 15 Days

China's main highlights, including a luxury Yangtze River cruise

Our popular 'Essential' itinerary ticks off China's most iconic sights in a focussed fortnight, hopping between locations with time-saving domestic flights. You'll see the Forbidden City and Temple of Heaven in the capital, the Great Wall, the Terracotta Army, the Panda Breeding Centre in Chengdu, before cruising through the dramatic Three Gorges of the Yangtze River. Finish with three nights in Shanghai. There will be enough time to savour the city's landmarks, shop for souvenirs, take in a few galleries and museums and visit the beautiful antique water towns of Suzhou and Zhujiajiao before flying back home.

A wide range of accommodation is available for every stage of this tour, which involves travelling via a mix of flights and private vehicle, as well as cruise ship. No strenuous physical exercise is required, though treks of various grades may be arranged, if desired, on the Great Wall and Qingcheng shan near Chengdu. Cyclists may also wish to make a circuit of the mighty Ming ramparts in Xi'an - a very memorable ride!

UK — Beijing (3 nights) — Xi'an (2 nights) — Chengdu (2 nights) — Yangtze Cruise (3 nights) — Shanghai (3 nights) — UK



China Grand Tour | 20 Days

Definitive tour of the country's principal attractions

Three weeks is the minimum amount of time required to complete a tour of China's Big Five sights (Beijing's 'Forbidden City', the Great Wall, Terracotta Army outside Xi'an, Panda Breeding Centre in Chengdu and Karst scenery around Guilin), along with the highlights of the south: the swirling rice terraces of Longji and city of Lijiang in Yunnan, whose iconic roovescape is framed by the snow peaks of the Jade Dragon Mountain. This once-in-a-lifetime trip will leave you awestruck at the refinement of ancient Chinese culture, and splendour of the country's landscape.

While accommodation choices are numerous in the cities, options are more limited in Yangshuo and Longji, where we only recommend specific, tried-and-tested, family-run guest houses offering great locations and dependably high standards of service. With a car at your disposal you won't need to do much walking, although those looking for soft treks and more challenging outdoor adventure will be spoilt for choice in Lijiang, Yangshuo and Longji.

UK — Beijing (3 nights) — Xi'an (2 nights) — Chengdu (2 nights) — Lijiang (3 nights) — Guilin (2 nights) — Yangshuo (2 nights) — Longji (2 nights) — Shanghai (2 nights) — UK



China's Ancient Heartland | 15 Days

Cave monasteries, ancient temples and historic gems

Trace the evolution of Chinese religious culture from the rock-cut caves of the Wei Dynasty (mid-5th century AD) to the warrior monks of Shaolin's Kung Fu temple on this two-week tour of China. You'll visit the extraordinary Ming palaces and temples of the capital, and the Great Wall, before travelling to the immaculately preserved medieval city of Pingyao, and then by overnight train to Xi'an to see the world-famous Terracotta Army. Songshan - a sacred Taoist and Buddhist peak, is the highpoint of a journey through the Yellow River's ancient sites, which include China's first Buddhist shrine and the fabulous Longmen Grottoes.

Revolving primarily around monuments, this is a trip for history buffs and anyone with a fascination for China's past. While all of the sites are easily accessible, travellers wishing to experience a remote and totally authentic side of the country may opt for the ascent of Songshan on foot, via its centuries' old pilgrims' pathways. Accommodation is of a high standard throughout, although generally not what may be described as 'boutique' or 'luxury' (except in the capital and Shanghai, if desired).

UK — Beijing (2 nights) — Datong (2 nights) — Taiyuan — Pingyao (2 nights) — train — Xi'an — Luoyang (2 nights) — Shanghai (2 nights) — UK



Shanghai & the Garden Cities | 12 Days

Classical Ming-era architecture, gardens and art

If you've been seduced by the sumptuous style of medieval China showcased in Ang Lee's movie, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, you'll love this leisurely tour of the most traditional, picturesque towns and cities on the country's east coast. It starts with the postcard-pretty 'water towns' near Shanghai, then visits Hangzhou, with its shimmering West Lake, and finally Nanjing, whose imperial past is represented by a magnificent 14th-century tomb complex, sited on a wooded hilltop on the city's eastern edge. The tour concludes back in Shanghai, where you can savour the astounding riverbank views before catching your flight home.

A wide range of accommodation choices are on offer at every stage of this trip, one of the few in our portfolio which may be conducted entirely overland, without recourse to internal flights. Focussing on well-preserved pockets of precolonial China, as well as the splendour of Shanghai, it offers plenty of inspiration for travellers with an interest in design, architecture, interiors and, of course, gardens. Only gentle walking is required. As ever, day trips will be covered by private car, with a guide.

UK — Shanghai (2 nights) — Suzhou (2 nights) — Hangzhou (2 nights) — Nanjing (3 nights) — Shanghai — UK



Iconic Landscapes of China | 17 Days

An active outdoor holiday combining China's scenic highlights

Antique scroll paintings spring to life on this 17-day tour, which blends together the crème de la crème of the country's distinctive landscapes. In addition to the quintessentially Chinese limestone scenery of Zhangjiajie, with its mist-shrouded, pine-studded rock towers, you'll see the dazzlingly turquoise travertine lakes of Jiuzhaigou and the splendour of three separate sacred mountains, where dramatic escarpments and forests are embellished with pretty Taoist shrines and temples, threaded together by ancient stepped pathways. The pandas and prehistoric wonders of Chengdu are the icing on the cake of this varied, outdoor-oriented itinerary.

To get the most out of this trip, you'll need to be in reasonable physical shape, and able to walk uphill for a couple of hours. Although cable cars and elevators have been installed on the sacred mountains, the most rewarding (read 'quietest') trails up them stretch the lungs and legs! A prime example is beautiful Qingcheng shan, which the two-night stop in Chengdu enables you to explore on foot.

UK — Zhangjiajie (2 nights) — Fenghuang (2 nights) — Hangzhou — Huangshan (2 nights) — Chengdu — Emeishan — Chengdu (2 nights) — Huanglong — Jiuzhaigou (2 nights) — Chengdu — UK



Minorities of the Southwest | 17 Days

Vibrant traditional dress, exotic architecture and mouth-watering regional cuisine

Ethnic minority communities are the focus of this adventurous route through China's rural southwest, which begins with a cruise along the Li River to experience the otherworldly landscape around Guilin and Yangshuo, heartland of China's iconic cormorant fishermen. From there, you travel north to Longji to view its spectacular rice terraces, and then follow a winding trail through the lush valleys of Guizhou Province, pausing at a string of fascinating wood and stone villages along the way, each of them bastions of different ethnic minorities. You'll see some extraordinary drum towers and 'wind and rain' bridges, and can opt to sleep in simple local homestays for a vivid taste of traditional China, with home cooked meals a particular highlight.

Opportunities for walks and treks are numerous throughout this trip, although not obligatory. Build in a little extra time for excursions on foot to more remote and traditional settlements. Your accommodation will be a mix of clean, comfortable guest houses, traditional-style resorts and newer properties with all mod cons.

UK — Guilin (2 nights) — Yangshuo (2 nights) — Longji (2 nights) — Sanjiang — Zhaoxing (2 nights) — Kaili (3 nights) — Guiyang (2 nights) — Shanghai — UK



Yunnan: Along the Tea Horse Road | 14 Days

Follow an ancient trade route to the heart of the Chinese Himalaya

Yunnan boasts the most astounding mountain landscapes in China and you'll experience the cream of them on this 14-day journey. Beginning in the Province's modern capital, site of an extraordinary 'stone forest' of limestone pinnacles, you'll follow the old Tea Horse trade route up to Dali on Lake Erhai. A feast of traditional architecture and minority cultures ensues in the bucolic Shaxi Valley, then the Naxi town of Lijiang, with its backdrop of shining snow peaks, and Shangri La, home to the region's grandest Tibetan monastery. A short flight across the mountains takes you back to Chengdu in time to see the pandas before catching your return flight to the UK.

This tour includes some exceptionally lovely places to stay, where the accommodation is very much central to the overall experience. You'll have plenty of opportunities to experience rural life, as well as bustling market towns and some impressive traditional architecture. The scenic highlight is provided by the astounding crags of Tiger Leaping Gorge. British Airways' direct flight from Chengdu to London offers a speedy, hassle-free route home.

UK — Kunming (2 nights) — Dali (3 nights) — Shaxi (2 nights) — Lijiang (2 nights) — Shangri La (2 nights) — Chengdu — UK



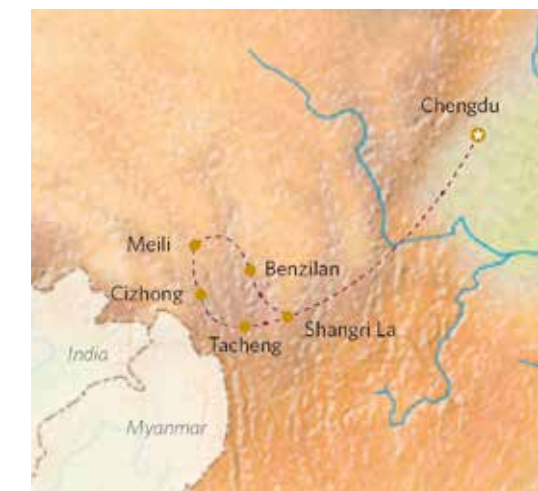
China's Forgotten Himalaya | 12 Days

Snow mountains, pristine forests and fascinating Tibetan and Bai minority cultures

A chain of five beautifully sited luxury lodges in the mountainous northwestern corner of Yunnan Province enable you to experience the region's most awe-inspiring scenery and Tibetan culture in matchless comfort. Savour the early morning alpenglow on Himalayan ice peaks through your hotel room window. Try your hand at throwing local blackware pots, or making incense in a remote farmstead. Enjoy a traditional lunch with Naxi villagers, and visit remote Buddhist grottoes in the hills. Unique in China, the Songsam experience is very special. We bookend the tour with a visit to Chengdu, famous for its Panda Breeding Centre, and connected by non-stop flights to London.

This is a luxury trip, revolving around boutique, alpine-style lodges that are unique in China. It doesn't present any physical challenges, although offers plenty of scope for walking should you desire - particularly around Meili, where we recommend you opt for an extra night if you wish to trek to the nearby glaciers. Transport is in a sturdy 4WD vehicle, and you're accompanied at all times by an English-speaking guide.

UK — Chengdu — Shangri La (2 nights) — Tacheng (2 nights) — Cizhong — Meili (2 nights) — Benzilan — Chengdu — UK



Unmissable Chinese cuisine

China's cuisine has long been one of its most successful exports. There is, however, no substitute for tasting authentic Chinese food in situ, particularly regional specialities, which tend to be prepared with greater attention to detail by chefs working on their home patch. Wherever you travel in the country, we recommend you sample the wonderful local dishes on offer at your hotel and nearby restaurants.

Peking Duck, Beijing | The secret of this delicacy's success is the way the meat is soaked in syrup, hung, and slow roasted in a wood-fired oven. Our favourite place to sample the definitive version is Liqun Road Duck Restaurant - a tiny courtyard place hidden deep in the hutongs of old Beijing. It's as popular with locals as overseas visitors.

Xi'an Dumplings, Xi'an | Part of the legacy of the city's enduring Muslim influence are its delicious dumplings, which are the mainstay of local restaurants, from hole in the wall eateries to sumptuous banquets featuring lavish after-dinner entertainment. Sesame seeds, minced leek and cilantro infuse a flavoursome kick into mutton variety (*suantang shuijiao*), the finest examples of which are served at Laosun Jia Restaurant, 78 Dongguan Zheng Street.

Sichuan Hot Pot, Chengdu | Everyone in Chengdu is mad about hot pot - where you effectively cook your own meat or seafood by dipping it into a tub of sauce or broth bubbling away on your table. Flavoured with an intense, oily mix of black bean paste, ginger, garlic, fennel, cardamom and Sichuan peppercorns, the sauce can pack quite a punch. A great place to try hot pot is Ma Tou, at 29 Yulin Middle Road in Chengdu.

Vegetarian meal at the Wenshu Temple, Chengdu | One of the finest veggie restaurants in China is tucked away behind the Wenshu Temple in the centre of Chengdu. With its traditional decor and bamboo furniture, it has heaps of Sichuanese atmosphere, and the food is wonderful. Try the monkey head mushrooms or *shumai* dumplings.

Cantonese Cuisine, Shanghai | Dim sum, crispy pork belly, shrimp dumplings and mango pudding are just some of the mouth-watering dishes that have made the cuisine of the southeastern seaboard famous across the world. Some of the finest Cantonese chefs are based in Shanghai, where you'll be spoiled for choice. A reasonably priced favourite restaurant of ours in the city is Crystal Jade (Xintiandi), at 123 Xingye Lu.



Beyond the Desert Gate: China's Silk Road

In the year 139 BC, the Han Emperor Wudi dispatched his top diplomat, Zhang Qian, on a mission to the unknown kingdoms west of the Great Wall. Braving some of the most extreme weather and wild nomadic peoples in Asia, he left at the head of a caravan of 99 men, returning 13 years later with only one. Yet despite the loss of his entire expedition, Zhang Qian was garlanded as a great explorer. For his accounts of the distant lands beyond the deserts and vast mountain ranges of the far west came as a revelation, opening up connections with the world beyond the borders of ancient China that would transform the lives of millions across the globe.

It was via the chain of oases leading across the deserts – known apocryphally as the ‘Silk Road’ – that Buddhism first reached the Yellow River, along with walnuts, grapes, wine and glass. In the other direction, gunpowder, oranges, roses, paper, knowledge of printing and, of course, silk making were among the wonders exported to the western world.

In time, the Chinese emperors erected a chain of forts along the old trade routes. Funded by profits from the commerce, monastic complexes also appeared, hewn from sand-blasted loess cliffs and richly decorated inside with murals and sculpture. Libraries of precious manuscripts and banners were also amassed, recording the earliest eras of Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity and the all-but-forgotten Manichaeism faith.

These evocative religious monuments, along with the remains of the great market hubs that once dominated the Silk Road, form the stepping stones of modern journeys across the provinces of Gansu and Xinjiang. It used to take 5 months to travel between Xi'an and Kashgar in the far west, crossing the mighty Taklamakan Desert to the passes that led over the Tianshan, Kunlun and Karakorum ranges into Central Asia and India. These days, thanks to modern air travel and landcruisers, you can cover the highlights in a couple of unforgettable weeks – and, unlike the hardy traders of past centuries, in great comfort, too.

In 2014, UNESCO highlighted the importance to world history of the Silk Road and associated monuments with its inauguration of the Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor, a 3,000-mile (5,000-km) sequence of cities, palace complexes, trading posts, cave temples, ancient pathways, beacon towers, tombs, guard posts and sections of the Great Wall. Its twin starting points are the former capitals of the Chinese dynasties whose patronage fuelled the rise of the Silk Road: Chang'an (Xi'an) and Luoyang in Shanxi Province – pivotal points on our own preferred routes through the heartland of China, and the perfect launch pads for extended journeys along this legendary trade artery.

Beyond the Celestial Mountains | Travellers wishing to extend their Silk Road tour into Central Asia may do so, following into the footsteps of ancient caravans by driving over the Torugart Pass through the Tianshan (Celestial Mountains) range into Kyrgyzstan, and thence westward into Uzbekistan to visit the fabled cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. For more on this fascinating region, see our coverage of Central Asia's highlights (see pp.144–161).



Bingling 'Thousand Buddha' Grottoes, Gansu

Of all the great rock-cut religious sites along China's Silk Route, Bingling boasts the most grandiose setting. Its 183 caves, carved over a period of 1,600 years by a succession of dynasties, encrust the foot of vast sandstone escarpments rising sheer from the Yellow River against a backdrop of eroded, cloud-swept pinnacles. Cut off from the nearest road by the Liujiaza Reservoir, the site can only be reached by boat, which only adds to its allure.

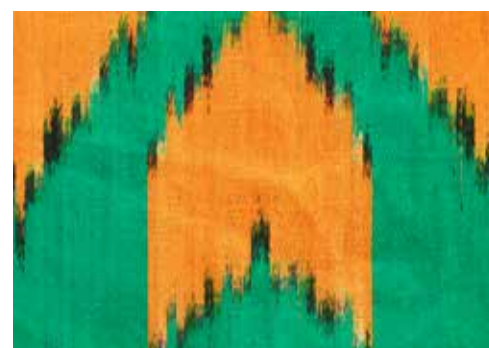
Because of its relative inaccessibility, hardly any tour groups make it to Bingling, which infuses the site with an aura of sanctity and remoteness that is often absent at more popular Buddhist caves such as Dunhuang and the Longmen Grottoes.



Xiahe

The lush mountains southwest of Bingling mark the outer limits of Tibetan influence – a fact dramatically underlined by the presence among them of Labrang Monastery, the largest and most important lamasery outside Tibet. Overlooking the market town of Xiahe, this sprawling complex is home to hundreds of Gelugpa ('Yellow Hat') monks. Throughout the year, wild-haired Tibetan pilgrims file past the long rows of prayer lining the parikrama (ritual circuit) of the great monastery, while in the ornately decorated halls, flickering butter lamps illuminate the gold-faced deities and beautiful thangkhas – an experience not to be missed.

Stay a couple of nights in Labrang, and you can trek up to the high ridges surrounding the town, or make longer trips out on to the nearby Sangke grasslands where local nomad families welcome visitors to look around their yurts, and share tea and a snack of yak yoghurt!



Mogao Caves, Dunhuang

Honeycombing desert cliffs above the Dachuan River, the 'Caves of a Thousand Buddhas' at Mogao, near the town of Dunhuang, are the greatest surviving monuments of the Silk Road. Around 500 chambers are all that's left of a once much larger complex, excavated over a thousand-year period beginning in the 4th century AD. The caves served mainly as hermits' cells and monasteries, and are adorned with resplendent murals and sculpture – a storehouse of ancient Buddhist art unrivalled in China. Finds from the so-called 'Library Cave' here included the world's oldest printed book, the 'Diamond Sutras', carried off by Aurel Stein and now part of the British Library's collection. Mogao's wonderful clay sculptures, giant Buddhas and frescoes, however, remain in situ and more than repay the effort it takes to reach this remote site.

Crescent Lake & the Singing Dunes

Some of the highest dunes in western China – in fact the entire world – lie a short ride south of Dunhuang. Nestled at their foot is a small, half-moon-shaped lake, next to which a Buddhist shrine sits amid the incongruous greenery – one of the loveliest sights of the Silk Road. Camel rides, sand tobogganing and parasailing are among the activities on offer to modern visitors.



Jiayuguan & the Hexi Corridor

Squeezing for 650 miles (1,000km) between the Tibetan Plateau and dunes of the Gobi Desert, the Hexi Corridor was the crux of the Silk Route's northern branch. A necklace of oases dotted along this ancient trackway enabled caravans to travel from Lanzhou to the so-called 'Jade Gate' in the far west, where the fort of Jiayuguan protected the corridor's narrowest point – the limit of Chinese civilization. Framed by an astonishing backdrop of snow-capped mountains, the fortress survives and has been immaculately restored in recent years, standing as an evocative reminder of the Silk Route's heyday. It was through the fort's infamous northwestern gateway that Chinese people banished from the empire would leave their homeland to face the sandy wastes of the Gobi Desert.



The Silk Road Hotel, Dunhuang

This palatial five-star on the outskirts of Dunhuang is the standout hotel on China's modern Silk Road – for more than one reason. Firstly, its appearance: made of exposed local stone and rammed earth, its giant sloping walls sport roofs with exotic upswept eaves. The building was designed to resemble a fortress-palace from the Han and Tang era, and looks spectacular against its backdrop of huge sand dunes. But the real selling point here are the wonderful desert vistas of dunes and ribbons of poplar trees from the rooftop restaurant terrace – an inspirational scene to gaze at over supper or a glass of local Mogao wine.



Urumqi & Heaven Lake

A major stop on the old Silk Road, Urumqi is today the capital of Xinjiang's 'Uyghur Autonomous Region' (UAR), with a population of over 3 million. It's a sprawling modern city, of interest primarily as a transport hub, but does possess an outstanding museum (famed for its collection of desiccated mummies from ancient sites further west) and lies within easy range of the chimeric Tian Chi, "Heaven Lake". Surrounded by snow peaks, pine forests and grassy meadows, the shores of this exquisitely beautiful lake are frequented by nomadic Kazakh herders, some of whom host visitors in their yurt camps for a night or two – a magical experience. A small fleet of excursion boats also chugs across the lake in summer, providing a relaxing way to enjoy the fabulous scenery.



Turpan

This atmospheric Uyghur oasis town on the northern Silk Road owes its existence to a 3000-mile network of irrigation tunnels and wells, known as karez, that collect and channel meltwater from nearby mountains. Turpan's elevation, at 30m below sea level, ensures freezing winters and scorching summers which, combined with the ample supply of water, have always made it a perfect place for growing fruit, notably grapes. A succession of large, walled cities sprang up here over the centuries, whose eroded ruins may still be visited on the outskirts. Artefacts from these, including an impressive collection of mummies, are displayed at the town's excellent museum (the best on the Silk Road), along with a superb array of dinosaur fossils.



Kashgar

Having squeezed around the edges of the Taklamakan Desert, the northern and southern Silk Roads converged on Kashgar, Xinjiang's westernmost city. Crowds of farmers and nomads still flock in each week for the town's famous Sunday market, the Yekshenba Bazaar – one of the great sights of the region. Hand-woven carpets, kilims and jade jewellery from Khotan, along with ornately decorated knives from nearby Yengisar, can be bought at bargain prices. A few conventional sights warrant detours, including the exquisite blue-and-white-glazed-tile tomb of Abakh Khoja – a 17th-century Sufi and political leader, and the impressive Id Kah mosque in the centre of town – both masterpieces of Central Asian architecture.

Exploring China's Ancient Silk Road

Exploring China's Silk Road | The ancient Chinese capitals of Chang'an (Xi'an) and Luoyang were the principal starting points of the Silk Roads, and remain the logical points of departure for modern travellers. Surviving remnants of the Han and Tang era, in and around both cities, convey a vivid sense of the splendour fuelled by the trade across the great deserts of the northwest, and form a memorable contrast with the sparse, arid world of Xinjiang and the Taklamakan.

Inevitably, the distances involved with exploring this part of the world are considerable, but travel in the era of high-speed rail and jet planes is far from arduous, allowing ample time to savour the distinctive atmosphere of the distant Uyghur cities, and the famous Buddhist monuments of Labrang and Dunhuang.

When to Go | Xinjiang boasts one of the most extreme climates on earth, so mid-winter and mid-summer are both best avoided. April to early June and Sept-October are ideal weather-wise (opt for early September if you want your trip to coincide with the grape harvest in Turpan). One thing you wouldn't have to cope with is persistent rain. Night time temperatures, however, can be surprisingly low in the desert regions, and an extra layer or two is advisable.

International Flights | British Airways fly non-stop from London Heathrow to Shanghai (11hrs), from where there are regular departures to Xi'an (2hrs

30min), and Luoyang (via Zhengzhou; 2hrs). You can also fly non-stop on British Airways to Chengdu (10hrs 15 min), from where the onward domestic leg to Xi'an takes only 1hr 30min (or 2hrs to Zhengzhou). Our other recommended departure point is Beijing, which will give you the chance to visit the Great Wall and Forbidden City.

Travel Along the Silk Road | It would not be possible to cover the highlights of China's Silk Road in a fortnight without relying heavily on internal flights, and most of itineraries in this part of the world include at least two or three. We do, however, recommend our clients make a minimum of one overnight train journey. Travelling by rail is a pleasurable way to experience everyday life in China, bringing you into contact with a wide range of people. Couchette services are also clean, comfortable and punctual.

For day trips and shorter journeys, we use private air-conditioned vehicles, with a driver and guide. Road conditions are generally good, even in remote areas of Xinjiang.

Accommodation | While visitor facilities in China's heartland are world-class, the far northwest of the country is less well-developed, and accommodation choices are more limited. We have, nevertheless, identified a chain of hotels and guest houses which we feel considerably enhance the overall experience of travelling in the Silk Road regions, whatever your budget. Visit our website for full descriptions of the properties we use in this region.

Suggested Itinerary

As with all our tailor-made trips, the route outlined here should only be considered as a suggestion, to be adapted according to your individual needs. With an extra week, for example, you might consider making a detour southwest of Kashgar to Hotan, at the foothills of the Kunlun mountain range, where vibrant bolts of Atlas silk are produced in local workshops, or head south through the Pamirs to Tashkurgan to see the town's mighty stone fortress and its formidable backdrop of snow peaks.

For travellers with a flexible time frame, there's also the option of continuing north from Kashgar, over the Tianshan mountains at the Torugart Pass and into Kyrgyzstan, then down the Fergana Valley into Uzbekistan and the fabled Khanate capitals of the Silk Road: Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. Numerous variations on this route may be devised, beginning in Urumqi rather than Xi'an. Whatever your starting point, this adventurous journey is indisputably one of the world's great road trips.

China's Ancient Silk Road | 19 Days

Archeological wonders, evocative monuments, and sacred landscapes

Our recommended route for exploring China's Silk Road begins with an in-depth exploration of the imperial cities which the trade artery helped to create. Xi'an was where the monk, Zhang Qian, began his legendary journey to India in 139 BC, and Luoyang is the site of China's oldest Buddhist temple. After a visit to the Longmen Grottoes and Terracotta Army – two of China's most splendid archaeological sites – you'll head west to Labrang Monastery on the fringes of the Tibetan Plateau, then north via the Bingling Grottoes to Jiayuguan Fort, at the far western end of the Great Wall, and the famous Mogao Caves at Dunhuang. It's desert all the way from here, as you proceed west from Turpan, site of a couple of long deserted Silk Road cities, to Kashgar, the fabled Uyghur market town at the crossroads of high Asia – one of the most remote cities on earth.

Although this tour involves a lot of travel, none of it could be described as 'arduous'. China's domestic air and rail networks are modern and efficient, as are trunk roads and the air-con vehicles we use for day trips and overland stages of tours. Hotel standards are high in China's heartland, but decline slightly as you travel west into Xinjiang.

UK — Shanghai — Luoyang (2 nights) — Xi'an (2 nights) — Xiahe (2 nights) — Jiayuguan (2 nights) — Dunhuang (2 nights) — Turpan (2 nights) — Urumqi — Kashgar (2 nights) — Beijing — UK





Tibet

A vast plateau bounded by the world's highest mountain ranges, Tibet feels quite unlike anywhere else on the planet. Echoing the rise and fall of its ice-dusted skylines are whitewashed Buddhist monasteries, soaring above valley floors carpeted with barley fields, or overlooking turquoise lakes cradled by lunar-like steppes of barren slopes and ice peaks. In the west, vast snow-deserts roll towards the borders of India and Nepal, dotted in summer with herds of yaks and nomad encampments. Everywhere, strings of multi-coloured prayer flags flap cheerfully from wayside shrines and rooftops - evidence of a deep-rooted Buddhist culture that has proved astonishingly resilient to the changes Tibet has experienced over the past five decades.

Chinese rule has brought with it rapid development. Yet in spite of its sometimes turbulent recent history, Tibet remains memorable for the same things that have always made it mysterious and alluring to travellers: its magical monasteries, vibrant culture, and other-worldly landscapes.



Lhasa

Dubbed the 'Forbidden City' during the 19th century, Lhasa has been the spiritual and political capital of Tibet since the Fifth Dalai Lama moved here in 1642. Protracted isolation from the rest of the world meant the arcane way of life led by its kings, clergy and citizens remained largely unaltered until the Chinese cultural revolution of the 1960s. In more recent times, mass migration from Han China has had a major impact. However, plenty of old-world Tibetan atmosphere survives.

Dominating the skyline is the Dalai Lama's former residence, the Potala - one of the world's most arrestingly exotic buildings. Its sloping red and white walls, which sweep from the valley floor up the sides of Marpo Ri ('Red Hill'), enclose 1,000 rooms and 10,000 shrines. Visitors can clamber up endless flights of steps to explore the ceremonial halls, throne room and private apartments which the Dalai Lama left when he fled into exile in 1959.

Down on Barkhor Square, the focus of round-the-clock ritual activity is Tibet's most revered temple complex, the gold-roofed Jokhang. Pilgrims in traditional Tibetan garb make their way around an octagonal walkway known as the Kora, before entering the shrine itself. The focus of their devotion is the gilded Jowo Shakyamuni Buddha in the central shrine - the most venerated deity in Tibetan Buddhism. The capital offers some inspirational places to stay, including a clutch of international-grade five stars boasting Potala views. Our favourite, though, is the Tibetan-owned Songtsam - a beautiful boutique lodge lined with lustrous local hardwood and fine handicrafts, which builds on the reputation for unrivalled hospitality established by Songtsam's other properties in Yunnan.





Tsetang & Yumbu Lakhang

Seat of Tibet's ancient emperors, Tsetang, on the Tsongpo (Brahmaputra) River 113 miles (183km) southeast of Lhasa, is the region's fourth city and most convenient base for exploring the spectacular valleys to its south, where a number of ancient monasteries reside amidst a landscape of surreal grandeur. Foremost among them is Yumbu Lakhang, whose distinctive whitewashed tower surveys a sublime spread of cloud-swept peaks from its rock perch above the Yarlung Valley. A Buddhist shrine has stood on this spot for 2,000 years, making it the oldest temple in Tibet.



Tombs of the Kings

A short drive away in the adjacent Chongye Valley stand the remains of the tombs belonging to Tibet's ancient kings. Eight vast, rectangular mounds streaked by centuries of soil erosion, the giant tumuli occupy a barren corridor dotted with lamaseries. Chronicles assert the kings were buried in silver coffins and suits of gold armour, with precious jewels and retinues of living servants to care for them in the afterlife - though for religious reasons none have ever been excavated, adding to their mystique.

Namtso Lake

Namtso, "Heavenly Lake", lies half a day's drive north of Lhasa. Once you've set eyes on its crystalline, turquoise water, framed by a backdrop of rolling grasslands and snow-covered mountains, all travel fatigue is instantly banished. The views from the many small monasteries, meditation caves and other sacred sites surrounding the lake are breathtaking - quite literally, with the altimeter at 15,500ft (4,718m), only a notch lower than the height of Everest Base Camp!



Samye (Sangye Si)

The first Buddhist monastery ever founded in Tibet, Samye occupies a suitably epic spot on the north side of the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) Valley. Tapering golden finials crown the top of the complex, whose walls are painted a deep russet colour with bands of black and white limewash. The finest view of the monastery is to be had from the summit of nearby Hepo Ri, a hillock that features on a ritual circuit ('Kora') following the ridges and cliffs behind Samye, which you can follow with your guide.



Gyantse

The distinctive profile of Gyantse's Kumbum is almost as recognizable as that of the Potala. Capped with a gilded dome and finial, the nine-storey chorten is a red-and-white wedding-cake confection of 77 interlocking chapels, connected by a warren of narrow passages and stairways. Each contains an array of wrathful demons and deities, depicted in vibrant murals and life-sized effigies. Gyantse is known as the "hero city" for its resistance to Younghusband's expedition of 1904.



Shigatse

Shigatse, Tibet's second city, is the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, the highest ranking lama after the Dalai Lama. Pilgrims pour through the town to worship at the stately Tashilunpo Monastery at its western end, which holds some of the most sumptuous chapels and Buddhist art outside Lhasa. Should you wish, your guide will be able to lead you along the 2-mile Kora circuit of Tashilunpo, which follows the walls and low hills around the complex and yields fine views over Shigatse Dzong (fort).





Rongbuk & Everest Base Camp

A dusty, bumpy track running south off the Friendship Highway leads to the most spectacular close-up view of the world's highest mountain you can have from ground level – at least without having to undertake an arduous, two-week trek. It leads to little Rongbuk monastery, in the Dzakar Chu valley, from where the magisterial north face of Everest is revealed in all its glory. Being in the shadow of the Himalayas, the valley sees very little snow, ensuring its slopes remain stark and stoney for most of the year – which only serves to accentuate the surreal beauty of the giant white pyramid looming at its head.



The 'Friendship Highway'

The most westerly stretch of China's National Highway 318, leading from Lhasa to the Nepalese border, is the most dramatic road in all of Tibet, if not the world. With a culminating altitude of 5,260m (17,256ft), it may not be the highest motorable route on the planet, but the views of Everest, Lhotse and other Himalayan giants rising from the ice-dusted tundra on the southern horizon are unsurpassed. Nowadays neatly surfaced, the road gives access to a string of sights that in previous centuries foreigners risked their lives to set eyes on.

Passing some of the region's most important monasteries, spectacular lakes and mountain vistas, tours following the route of the highway take 5 or 6 days to reach the border, with the final downhill stage to Kathmandu requiring a further 5 to 6 hours. Travellers spend their penultimate night of the trip at a basic hotel or guest house in the town of Zhangmu, 5 miles (8km) short of the actual border on the Kyi Chu River, spanned by the famous Sino-Nepali Friendship Bridge.



The Wild West: Lake Mansarovar & Mount Kailash

Covering an area twice the size of Germany, the west of Tibet is rugged, sparsely populated and breathtakingly beautiful. With a mean elevation of around 4,500m (14,763ft), it is also high and very dry, requiring several days of altitude acclimatisation along the way, which is the main reason so few visitors explore this magical region.

The main incentive to do so is to glimpse Tibet's most sacred mountain, Kailash – a jaw-dropping, pyramidal ice peak standing proud of its neighbours and the surrounding tundra, and which Tibetans, Hindus and Jains regard as holy. A mass pilgrimage takes place each summer in which worshippers make an auspicious circuit of the mountain. The 32 miles (52km) route, known as the 'Kailash Kora', reaches a highpoint of 5,640m (18,500ft) and takes three days to complete.

At the foot of the mountain, set against a mesmerizing backdrop of snowy summits and grasslands, lies ethereal Lake Mansarovar. Several small Tibetan guest houses are dotted along its shores, allowing you to linger for a night or two and enjoy the extraordinary interplay of light, cloud, and shimmering reflections off the glassy water.

Exploring Tibet

Exploring Tibet | With the more remote parts of Tibet beyond the range of most two to three week holidays, our tours focus on the country's cultural heartland, in the central region around the capital Lhasa, the site of its most revered Buddhist monasteries. Although recent decades have seen a huge influx of Han Chinese and a consequent erosion of traditional culture in the larger towns and cities, you'll spend much of your trip in quieter, provincial locations, where the atmosphere remains distinctly Tibetan. One advantage of Chinese rule has been a widespread upgrade in road conditions, which ensures amazingly smooth travel for such rugged terrain.

When to Go | Although most of Tibet lies within the rain shadow of the Himalayas, and thus receives comparatively little rainfall, its altitude means winters are severe, with freezing temperatures and frequent snowstorms that can disrupt travel. The busy visitor season therefore does not get underway until early April and lasts through to mid-November. May and October generally bring the clearest, bluest skies. Night time temperatures can be chilly at any time of year, especially in the higher valleys, requiring an extra layer or two, and a warm coat or down jacket.

International Flights | Our most direct and economical route to Tibet is to fly to Lhasa via Chengdu, which is connected to London Heathrow via British

Airways' non-stop '787 Dreamliner' service. Flight time is approximately 10hrs 15 min. The onward flight to Lhasa takes 2hrs 30min. You can also fly indirectly from a number of UK airports, including Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Another option is to fly via Kathmandu, in Nepal – a most exotic stopover! Boasting some fine Ming temples and, of course, the world-famous Panda Breeding Centre, Chengdu makes an ideal place to pause and acclimatize.

Travel Around Tibet | Your tour will be conducted by private vehicle, usually a 7-seater Hyundai or Toyota Landcruiser. We only use low-mileage, air-conditioned cars, and you'll be accompanied throughout by your driver and an English-speaking guide specializing in the locations featured on your trip.

Accommodation | Accommodation in Tibet is a mixture of Chinese-style business hotels, larger five-stars geared for foreign visitors, and smaller, more Tibetan-styled guest houses, featuring traditional architecture, painted woodwork, local carpets and furniture. We are particularly excited by the prospect of a new chain of beautiful boutique places being developed by the Yunnanese-Tibetan company, Songtsam. Their first hotel, in Lhasa, recently opened and a string of others stretching east to Lijiang will follow. Ask your TransIndus consultant for the latest update.



Suggested Itinerary

Our recommended itinerary covers the very best Tibet has to offer in a varied fortnight. It can, of course, be shortened or extended depending on your requirements. Over the coming years, the greener, eastern half of the

region is also scheduled to be opened to visitors for the first time, unlocking a fabulous route all the way to Lijiang, served by a string of luxury lodges. Speak to our specialist team for advice.

Discover Tibet | 14 Days

Tibet's greatest monasteries and mountain-scapes

Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province, serves as our gateway to Tibet. Having seen the pandas and ascended the sacred Taoist mountain of Qingcheng shan outside the city, you'll fly to Lhasa and spend a couple of days acclimatising with leisurely visits to the Jokhang and Potala Palace. Next up, an epic road trip featuring the cream of Tibet's monasteries, mountain vistas, villages, market towns and turquoise glacial lakes. You'll encounter pilgrims measuring their progress to Lhasa by prostrations along the road, herds of grazing yaks, windswept passes festooned with prayer flags and, the icing on the cake, an astounding view of Everest from base camp below the peak's ice-encrusted north face.

Altitude acclimatisation is essential. We plan all our itineraries to ensure sufficient time is allocated for your body to get used to the thin air, and your guide will make sure you do everything necessary to stay healthy. Aside from negotiating flights of steps in Buddhist monasteries, this trip does not require any strenuous exercise – although you'll have plenty of opportunities to stretch your legs should you desire!

UK — Chengdu — Lhasa (3 nights) — Tsetang (2 nights) — Gyantse — Shigatse — Shegar — Everest Base Camp — Shigatse — Chengdu — UK





Japan

Multi-faceted and endlessly compelling, Japan is a country like no other. From bullet trains scything past Mt Fuji to the neon-lit intersections of Tokyo, images of its modern face are familiar the world over - as are visions of its more traditional past, whether the face of a rose-lipped geisha or glint of a samurai sword. Both reflect the great technological skill and cultural refinement that have always underpinned Japanese civilization, and which continue to inform every aspect of life, from the subtleties of the country's cuisine to the seductive savoir vivre of its temple architecture, Zen gardens and thermal spas.

Having garnered rave reviews from our clients for more than 15 years, it comes as no surprise to us that Japan these days consistently tops polls as 'the world's best destination'. The secret of its success: a unique blend of cutting-edge modernity and deep-rooted tradition that make it both a profoundly exotic place to visit, and one offering the highest standards of service, efficiency and luxury.



Highlights of Japan ●

Tokyo | The Japanese capital is also one of the world's most eclectic cities, with a traditional, contemplative flipside to its modern face. Shopping, temple visits and people watching are the order of the day.

Tea Ceremony in a Great Garden | Experience the refined pleasures of a Japanese tea ceremony, ideally in a cedar wood hut at one of the country's 'Three Great Gardens', or *Nihon Sanmeien*.

Kyoto | Kyoto is the place to come to see geishas, Kabuki theatre, museums and temples packed with ancient art - quite simply one of the world's most captivating cities and a cultural feast.

Nikko | A feast of old-world Japanese architecture nestles under the cryptomeria trees at Nikko, where some of the country's former Shoguns were enshrined in richly carved tombs and temples.

The Japan Alps | The Japan Alps are the scenic highlight of the Chubu region and the perfect antidote to the headlong rush of the nearby cities. Relax in a spring-fed hot tub with a view to die for!

The Snow Monkeys of Jigokudani | This colony of pink-faced macaques banishes the rigours of winter in the Japan Alps by languishing in a hot thermal pool - a heart-warming spectacle.

Kii Peninsula | The Kii Peninsula is a mountainous region southeast of Osaka boasting a fabulous coastline and a network of pilgrimage paths through the cedar forest connecting ancient Shinto shrines.

Kyushu | The balmy southern island of Kyushu is a green, rugged region, replete with active volcanoes, bubbling hot pools, stunning coastal scenery, a verdant hinterland and delicious seafood.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+9 hours
Flying time: 11.30 hours
Currency: Japanese yen
Capital: Tokyo

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	5	6	9	14	18	21	25	26	23	18	12	8
Rainfall mm	43	58	94	119	132	181	128	147	181	158	84	44
Best to travel	●	●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●	●

●● The best time to travel ● A good time to travel ● Low season

Be inspired

For help planning your perfect holiday, contact us at the Old Fire Station, Ealing, London.
 Tel: **020 8566 3739**
 Web: www.transindus.com



Shinjuku

The hub of modern Tokyo is Shinjuku, a district with two distinct facets. In the low-rise lanes of its eastern half, countless bars and *pachinko* (Japanese pinball) parlours cater for the crowds of mainly male commuters ('Salary Men') who stream through here each evening on their way home to the suburbs. Skyscraper-studded West Shinjuku, by contrast, is the workaday financial centre and home of the city's government, as well as numerous luxury car showrooms and haute couture fashion stores.

In the midst of all the glamour, one of Japan's most revered Shinto shrines, the Meiji Jingu, strikes an incongruously serene note. Your TransIndus guide will lead you through the thousands of worshippers who pour beneath its huge, cedar-shaded *torii* gateway each day (many of them dressed in traditional garb) to leave wooden plaques on the famous wishing wall. If you're lucky, you may catch a silent Shinto wedding party, led by a bride dressed in voluminous white kimono.

Shibuya

Bustling Shibuya districts' iconic central intersection – known to locals, for obvious reasons, as "the Scramble" – is Tokyo's answer to Times Square. Surrounded by giant video screens and neon-lit tower blocks, the crazy pedestrian crossing serves an estimated 1,000 people per light change at peak times and presents a prime photo opportunity from the cafés overlooking it, particularly after dark on Fridays and Saturdays.

Tokyo

As the epicentre of the world's largest and most cutting-edge conurbation, Tokyo is where the nation's heart beats fastest. If there's a new gadget or fashion accessory out, you'll see it crossing the Ginza intersection first. Being squashed into a metro train by a white-gloved *oshiya* (station attendant) is a singularly Japanese experience, but so is shopping for designer treats in ritzy Omotesando Hills, and catching an old-style wedding at Meiji Jingu Shrine, where brides, grooms and priests don traditional finery.

Rather than pivot around a central downtown area, the capital is made up of different neighbourhoods, each with its own centre of gravity, reflecting the character of the village it was before it was absorbed into the expanding megacity. Our tours are generally conducted by a private guide using Tokyo's excellent public transport system.





Ueno & Asakusa

The districts north of downtown retain the remnants of Tokyo's 'Low City', Shitamachi – an area of narrow streets and neighbourhood markets perfect for aimless ambles, where you can get a sense of what Tokyo might have looked like before the Meiji era of the 19th century. The subject of numerous antique woodblock prints, sprawling Ueno Park is its main focal point. The woods and grassy expanses once served as a retreat for the shogun, and retain a scattering of Buddhist shrines, pagodas and ornamental lakes, as well as the wonderful National Museum, whose collection of 110,000 precious Japanese art works is the finest in the world.

The Asakusa district next to the park holds a higher concentration of pre-1960s buildings than any other in the city. Long an entertainment enclave of Japanese cinemas, theatres and Geisha houses, it is also where you'll find Tokyo's most revered shrine, the Senso-ji Temple, whose approach is lined by colourful little shops selling traditional souvenirs and charms.



Park Hotel Tokyo

Hip and trendy in an unmistakably Japanese way – we love the Park for its sense of fun and style, and for its commitment to the arts. Some of the country's leading painters were commissioned to decorate the renowned 'Artist' rooms here, and the results are spectacular. The 'City' alternatives are rather more sober, but very suave and soothing. Most enjoy magnificent views across the business and culture district of Shiodome, and out across the futuristic skyline of central Tokyo. On site are an 'atrium sky garden', an internationally-acclaimed spa, a Gallic bistro (serving 'casual French' cuisine) and a sumptuous kaiseki restaurant (one of the capital's finest).



Ginza

As the location of some of the capital's most famous department stores and designer outlets, Ginza is a shopaholic's heaven. Don't miss Mitsukoshi's flagship store overlooking 4-Chome junction, which has half a floor dedicated to fancy Japanese confectionary, and another entirely devoted to silk kimonos. Your TransIndus guide will encourage you to arrive in time for the 10am opening, when ranks of immaculately coiffured assistants line up to welcome shoppers.

Start your day by exploring the narrow lanes of Tsukiji market – one of Tokyo's intriguing spectacles, selling local seafood and seasonal vegetables. Afterwards, partake of a well-earned flavoursome sushi breakfast or lunch in one of the markets's cafés, then continue across town to the Kabuki Theatre to catch a performance of the country's classical dance drama, featuring exuberantly costumed actors, puppets and traditional music.

Takeshita Dori

This vibrant shopping street opposite Harajuku Station is a Mecca for young Japanese fashionistas and members of the city's outlandishly dressed teenage 'tribes' (or 'kei'), who flock here on weekends to strut their stuff around Takeshita's trendy boutiques and cafés. The subcultures revolve around flakey, extravagant costumes, often inspired by cartoon and nursery rhyme characters, and are fabulously photogenic. If you're in town on a weekend, another great venue for tribe spotting is the entrance to Yoyogi Park, where serious Rock 'n' Rollers gather to jive in eye-catching 1950s costumes.



Palace Hotel Tokyo

An iconic hotel from the 1960s, this large, 20-storey skyscraper in Marunouchi sits opposite the Imperial Palace gardens at the heart of Tokyo. Following a £750-million makeover, it now ranks among Japan's most opulent five-stars, with interiors oozing restrained grandeur and sophistication. We love the sensuous, kimono-inspired colour schemes of pistachio and peach, the silky carpets, the interplay of granite, marble, glass and ebony, and decadent choice of (10!) restaurants (including the Michelin-starred 'Crown'). If you want to treat yourself, go for a room with a balcony overlooking Wadakura fountain park – surely one of Asia's most mesmerizing urban views.

Mount Fuji

Rising from the Pacific coast of central Honshu, Mount Fuji is Japan's iconic sacred mountain – an active volcano whose elegantly sloping flanks have inspired painters, printers, poets and Shinto mystics for many centuries. A well-known saying asserts that it's unlucky to climb the peak twice, but a huge number of outdoors enthusiasts and pilgrims make the ascent each summer in July and August, when the summit is ice free and easily accessible to anyone with sufficient stamina. Less adventurous souls can admire its beautiful shape from the shores of the four lakes lapping the mountain's base.



Hakone & Lake Ashi

A popular retreat for over a thousand years, this thermal resort to the west of Tokyo serves as a springboard for the popular Hakone National Park, whose natural wonders include Mount Fuji and shimmering Lake Ashi. In clear weather, spectacular views of the sacred peak and its outlying mountains are to be had from the onsen (hot spring) resorts dotted around the town, while a funicular railway and ropeway connect a circuit of delightful open-air museums and galleries, featuring works by contemporary Japanese artists, as well as the likes of Rodin and Henry Moore.



Lake Ashi, on the southwest flank of Mount Hakone, was where the great feudal lord, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, ordered hot spring baths to be built to aid the recovery of his battle-scarred soldiers following the Siege of Odawara in 1590, and onsen resorts and ryokans have proliferated around its shores ever since. Excursion boats, many of them replica medieval Japanese galleons, cross the waters, offering superlative views of the surrounding summits.

Kamakura

An hour's train ride from Tokyo, Kamakura is a peaceful seaside town that makes a memorable day trip. In addition to the pounding surf of Sagami Bay, its main attractions are the dozens of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines scattered across the wooded hills enfolding the town, some of which date back 1,200 years. The most famous houses the iconic 'Daibutsu', a huge, 121-tonne bronze Buddha cast in 1254.



Nikko

Lines of moss-covered Jizo bodhisattvas sporting knitted crimson caps and bibs; stone lanterns backed by towering Japanese cedars; a red-lacquer bridge framed by snowy white mountains – Nikko is like a Japanese ink painting brought to life. The oldest monuments in this atmospheric mountain town date from 766 AD, but the place really blossomed in the 1600s after the great Tokugawa shogun who first unified Japan (and later provided the subject for James Clavell's hit novel, *Shogun*) was enshrined here. The great warlord is buried in a richly ornate, red-and-green painted mausoleum, known as the Toshogu Shrine, whose sumptuous decorations include the much photographed 'three wise monkeys' and some of the country's finest temple carvings. For walkers, the network of trails winding around Chuzenji Lake and through the forests of the surrounding national parks offer numerous possibilities of day hikes.



Onsen: Rejuvenating Hot Springs

Natural hot springs, known as 'onsen', have been an essential part of Japanese culture for centuries – hardly surprising in a country bubbling with geothermal energy. Every region has its own favourite spas, which vary in character from ritzy and modern to earthy and traditional. Some are set in narrow mountain valleys, others slap on the seashore with their toes in the waves. Their waters may, depending on their temperature and mineral or plant content, be turquoise, espresso-coloured, russet, red, green, purple or black. They all, however, offer a uniquely Japanese – and deeply relaxing – experience.

Our favourite onsens are the open-air pools, known as 'roten-buro', attached to ryokans and spa hotels, where the tubs tend to be made of stone or fragrant cedar wood, and set in delightful gardens or rockeries, with ornamental plants, water features and expansive vistas to savour as you soak in the hot waters. As well as being the perfect antidote to travel induced aches and pains, onsens are a great way to enjoy the delights of nature, whether cherry blossoms in the spring, the changing leaves in the autumn, or winter snowscapes.



Gora Kadan Ryokan, Hakone

Many TransIndus clients regard this wonderful ryokan in Hakone as among the highlights of their tour, and with good reason. It's one of the loveliest we've found anywhere in Japan, and absolutely all you could wish for in an onsen resort. The rooms are furnished to the highest standards in quintessential Japanese style, featuring washi paper walls and tatami mats. Futons are the norm, but some have Western beds. The stone and cypress wood hot tubs, fed by natural hot springs and complemented by indoor steam rooms, are heavenly. Most offer inspirational views of the mountains, yet great privacy at the same time, while the *kaiseki* suppers are another highlight.



The Japan Alps

All but one of the country's 30 highest peaks fall within the 'Japan Alps' of Central Honshu. The name was coined by an English engineer and archaeologist named William Gowland in the 19th century. Gowland was the first foreigner to explore

and scale the principal summits of the Hida, Kiso and Akaishi ranges, whose sawtooth tops today provide a compelling backdrop for winter sports in the area. In summer, the Alps offer superlative walking. One of the signature treks follows a

stretch of the old Edo-era postal road down the dramatic Kiso Valley, between the villages of Tsumago and Magome. Passing through a string of former post towns, pretty farmsteads and pine forests, the route can be covered in 2-3hrs.



The Snow Monkeys of Jigokudani

It was in the early 1960s that the Japanese macaques of upper Yokoyu Valley first discovered the joys of basking in thermal pools to alleviate the rigours of winter. Alas, their droppings did little for business, so the local hoteliers built a special onsen for them at Jigokudani, where a troupe of over 200 have now become the area's principal visitor attraction.

The pink-faced monkeys live at a more northerly latitude than any other non-human primate. Their yellowish, grey-brown fur is well-adapted to the conditions, but even so, life can be harsh for them in winter - hence their love of hot-water bathing. Watching the macaques go about their daily lives is the real highlight of visits to Jigokudani. Juveniles hang upside down from tree branches, play chase and leap joyfully in to the hot water, while their older relatives soak in the pool, peering wistfully into space or closing their eyes as the mayhem unfolds around them.

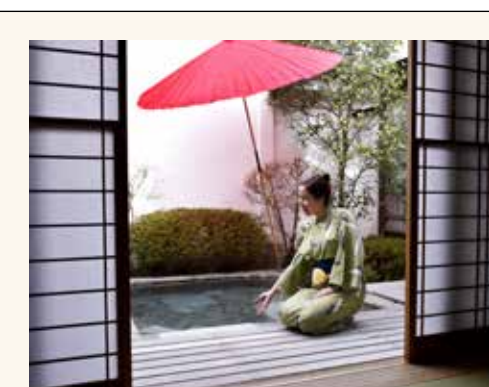
Obuse

A stop we always recommend to clients visiting the Snow Monkeys is the nearby town of Obuse, where the illustrious *ukiyo-e* woodblock print artist, Kasushika Hokusai (1760-1849), spent the latter years of his life. A fine little museum exhibits some of his most famous work, including the *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* and *Great Wave of Kanagawa*, which so impressed Van Gogh and other French Impressionist painters in the 19th century. Hokusai's main patron was the wealthy merchant and dilettante, Takai Kozan, whose Edo-period mansion houses an exhibition of Hokusai prints and Kozan's own calligraphy. The town itself retains plenty of traditional Japanese character, with numerous old shops and sake breweries to explore if time permits.



Shibu Onsen

The thermal resort of Shibu Onsen, a steadfastly old-fashioned spa resort in the Yokoyu Valley, is our preferred base for visiting the famous 'Snow Monkeys', who live in and around a steaming pool at the Jigokudani Monkey Park, a bus ride further up the valley. The macaques can be viewed year-round, but are at their most photogenic between November and February, when a thick covering of snow carpets the ground, and steam swirls evocatively from the dark-green waters of their pool.



Ryokans: Traditional Japanese Living

One of the highlights of traveling in Japan is the chance to experience the traditional hospitality of a ryokan. These quintessentially Japanese inns have no real equivalent in the West, their old-world atmosphere being little changed since the Edo period of the 16th century, when ryokans first sprang up along the imperial Tokaido highway between Tokyo and Kyoto.

Shoji sliding doors of translucent handmade washi paper, low tables, futons and fragrant tatami mats made from rice straw set the tone. For dinner, guests are encouraged to don the full-length *yukata* and *obi* sashes specially supplied by the inn. The *kaiseki* cuisine tends to be as refined as the decor, with dishes prepared from fresh, seasonal ingredients and served in great style on beautiful handmade plates enlivened by an edible garnish of leaves and flowers. Some of our favourite ryokans feature spring-fed hot tubs in their gardens boasting serene views - simply heavenly!





Takayama

In a country as comprehensively modernized as Japan, it's a rare pleasure to stroll along streets whose shopfronts, coffee shops and old sake bars look almost exactly as they would have done a century or more ago. Formerly a wealthy merchants' quarter, Takayama's old town holds a bumper crop of Edo-period buildings, many of them dating from the early 18th century. Several have been converted into museums where you

can admire painstakingly recreated interiors, and galleries showcasing lion masks, mechanical puppets and other crafts featured in the town's biannual Shinto festivals, when huge, ornately decorated floats are hauled through the streets. Takayama's plentiful supply of pure spring water has also made it an important centre for sake production, and visits to its eight antique breweries are a popular pastime in January and February.



Shirakawa-go

Physically remote from the rest of Japan, the thatched villages of Shirakawa-go survived for many centuries by cultivating mulberry trees and spinning fine silk. Known as *gassho-zukuri* ('Hands in Prayer'), their distinctive A-frame style of architecture and delightful location, on terraced plateaux above the Shogawa River, has earned for the settlements coveted UNESCO World Heritage status. One or two houses have been converted into beautiful little minshuku (B&Bs) where you can enjoy the region's traditional chic from the inside.

Kamikochi

Dramatic vistas of snow-capped mountains and pristine pine forests await walkers in the remote Kamikochi Valley, part of the Chubu-Sangaku National Park - a sanctuary often dubbed 'Japan's Yosemite' because of its awesome landscapes. Wander along the banks of rushing torrents, lined with bamboo grass, or pull on your boots for a full-on expedition to the snowline, overnighting in isolated mountain huts. Whatever kind of adventure you're looking for, we can provide qualified, English-speaking guides and expert route advice.



Kanazawa

Buffered by the ocean and Alps of central Honshu, Kanazawa has over the centuries enjoyed longer periods of peace and prosperity than most Japanese cities, which has enabled it to develop its own, unique cultural life, whence its nickname, 'Little Kyoto'. A good example of its many understated wonders is the 17th-century Kenroku-en, regarded as one of the country's 'Three Great Gardens', whose stands of ancient pines, ornamental lotus ponds and pretty fruit orchards extend over 25 manicured acres. The name means 'Six Elements', referring to the attributes essential to any harmonious Japanese garden: space; tranquillity; artifice; antiquity; water; and fine views.

As Kanazawa escaped the carpet bombing that levelled so many Japanese cities during World War II, many of its neighbourhoods retain great, period character, particularly the samurai quarter of Nagamachi. More traditional style is on display at the 'Higashi Pleasure District' - a heritage enclave of double-storeyed, wood-fronted shops, among which the Shima Geisha Museum offers insights into the cloistered life of the Japanese geisha (around 40 geishas remain active in the city). Gold leaf features prominently in the district's many craft shops - the lustrous foil is a Kanazawan speciality. Local ice cream parlours sometimes offer it as a luxury embellishment, claiming the leaf improves digestion.



Matsumoto

Matsumoto, springboard for the Japan Alps, is a compact city spread over the flat floor of a valley surrounded by shadowy foothills. It holds one outstanding historic treasure: a late-16th-century castle featuring six black-and-white-painted storeys. The upswept eaves of its keep, reflected to dramatic effect in the carp-filled waters of the surrounding moat, are thought to resemble the spreading wings of a bird, whence its nickname, *Karasu-jo*, or 'Crow Castle'. Wonderful vistas of the nearby mountains are to be had from the recently restored Tsukimi Yagura ('Moon Viewing Turret').



Oiwasan Nissekiji Temple, Toyama

An hour west of Kanazawa lies an ancient temple with great significance for adherents of the Shingon sect. Shingon is a form of Buddhism which places great emphasis on esoteric ritual, and the Oiwasan Nissekiji shrine hosts among the most visually arresting of these. After paying their respects to the early 8th-century bas-relief of Fudo Myoo (the 'God of Fire'), housed inside the temple, worshippers dressed in white robes make their way to a waterfall nearby, where they stand under spouts of freezing water shouting mantras to help endure the cold. Steaming bowls of fragrant somen noodles, served in stalls at the temple entrance are the traditional restorative for this ordeal by freezing water.

Hiroshima

Every year at 8:15am on August 6th, a minute of silent prayer attended by thousands of people in the Hiroshima National Peace Memorial, marks the moment when, in 1945, an atomic bomb was dropped on the city. An estimated 80,000 people lost their lives in an instant; 60,000 others perished from their injuries before the year was out.

A museum in the Peace Memorial complex, close to the epicentre of the explosion, displays the few photographs taken in its aftermath, along with testimonies from survivors. Despite the fact that an entirely new, vibrant city has since been built over the radioactive ashes, visiting the site tends to evoke strong emotions. Only by coming to Hiroshima, however, is it possible to fully comprehend the scale of the tragedy – and the astonishing resilience of those who survived it.



Miyajima Island

The vision of the Itsukushima shrine's vermilion-coloured torii gateway rising serenely from the waters of the Seto Inland Sea is almost as iconic of Japan as Mount Fuji. Carved from decay-resistant camphor wood and coated in red lacquer, the structure serves as a ceremonial entrance to one of the country's most revered Shinto complexes, whose pagoda roofs nestle alluringly on the small island of Miyajima in Hiroshima Bay.

From behind the 'floating' shrine, the wooded slopes of Mount Misen sweep to a sacred peak; the boulder-studded summit affords a wonderful view across the ocean and surrounding islets. Visitors can catch a cable-car ride to within half an hour's walk of the top, or climb all the way through dense forests of maple, cherry and conifers. A religious decree forbids the felling of any tree on Miyajima and the result is a botanical feast, especially during the autumn, when the maple leaves glow vivid crimson.

Iwaso Ryokan, Miyajima

Originally founded as a teahouse in the 1850s, this famous ryokan on Miyajima Island is a bastion of refined Japanese hospitality. The majority of its spacious rooms and suites date from the 1930s-1950s, and are furnished in period style, with polished, low tables on tatami floors, sliding paper screens, lattice walls and antique alcove posts. Panoramic views over the treetops of the Momijidoni Valley extend from the wood-floored balconies; deer routinely amble past the windows. The high quality kaiseki meals are very much in keeping with the decor, and feature the local speciality: steamed oysters with fresh lemon. There's also a wonderful outdoor onsen pool open to the valley.



Nara

Nara ranks among the most charismatic cities in Asia, thanks to its extraordinary collection of antique buildings, many of which are more than a thousand years old. Its UNESCO-listed centrepiece is the spectacular Todai-ji Temple, home to a 500-tonne, 16-metre-tall, bronze-cast Daibutsu Buddha. The world's largest wooden building, the shrine now resides in a leafy park where sacred sika deer roam free, cadging titbits off visitors.

Forming the easternmost arm of the Silk Road, Nara absorbed many influences from India, mainland China, Central Asia and even distant Persia, and its wonderful museum near the Todai-ji Temple holds a hoard of precious antiquities underlining these ancient connections. Foremost among them are the contents of the 7th-century Shoso-in Treasury, a selection of which are exhibited for just a fortnight each year in late October-November, when the precious artefacts are least likely to be damaged by humid air.



Kurashiki

The graceful canal area of this old merchants' town near Okayama is a rare survivor from the prosperous Edo period, boasting an exceptional assemblage of 18th-century buildings distinguished by trademark white-washed walls and black tilework. The pick of the crop lie within the postcard pretty Biku quarter, bisected by a green, koi-filled canal where you can charter a punt and spend a relaxing hour gliding past drooping willow trees and ranks of elegant granaries. Many of these so-called 'kura' grain stores have recently been converted into trendy cafés and crafts shops, offering a delightful backdrop for leisurely afternoon strolls. An unexpected treat in this most Japanese of towns is the Ohara Museum hosting works by Cézanne, Degas, Matisse, Monet, Pissarro and Jackson Pollock – worth the ticket price alone for a glimpse of El Greco's 16th-century masterpiece, *Annunciation*.



Okayama

The castle town of Okayama, in Western Honshu, is renowned across the country as the site of one of Japan's 'Three Great Gardens' or *Nihon Sanmeien*. Originally laid out in 1687, the Koraku-en comprises acres of lawns and ponds interspersed by water courses and pathways. Its landscaped grounds are filled with rockeries, azaleas, clumps of rhododendrons and fruit trees that look particularly exquisite in the blossom season. Slip off your shoes and relax in the quintessentially Japanese *ryuten* rest house, a wooden structure without walls where a stream babbles through a series of carefully placed stones.



Himeji Castle

Framed by tufts of cherry blossom from the surrounding orchards, the distinctive profile of Himeji Castle epitomises the exotic grandeur of Japan's samurai culture. Its white walls and black-tiled, upswept roofs crown a low hill in the heart of the city, dominated by the towering keep whose six storeys soar above a series of interlocking walls, baileys, moats and Edo-style gardens. Inside the castle, displays of medieval weapons enliven interiors of polished wood and latticed bay windows.



Temples, Shrines & Castles

Kyoto holds enough enthralling religious monuments to keep you busy for literally weeks, but a few days will suffice to cover the highlights. Start with the sublime Kinkaku-ji 'Golden Temple', whose gilded pavilion, set in an elegant ornamental garden, is reflected to magical effect in the waters of its adjacent pond, then visit Nijo Castle, renowned for its sumptuously ornate interiors and squeaky 'nightingale' floors. More national treasures are on display at the Nishi Hongan-ji and Higashi temples, whose inner halls are also lavishly gilded and painted. While the city's famous landmarks understandably attract considerable attention, you can always escape the crowds at hundreds of less known monuments. One of our favourites is the Fushimi Inari Shrine, sited on the slopes of a mountain rising above Kyoto's outskirts, where the pathways between four main shrines are spanned by arcades of vermilion-painted *torii* shrine gates, each bearing a donatory inscription – a quintessentially Japanese spectacle.



Zen Rock Gardens & Walks

Kyoto's Buddhist temples hold some of Japan's finest dry-landscape gardens. Regarded as the perfect expression of Zen philosophy, a prime example is the Ryoan-ji, comprised of 15 stones set in an expanse of raked gravel. Symbolizing man's relationship with the Universe through waterfalls of white chippings and mossy rocks, the Daisen-in garden at the Daitoku-ji temple should also not be missed.

The cherry and maple blossom seasons are the ideal time to follow the tree-lined pathway along Kyoto's central canal – known as the 'Philosopher's Walk'. Numerous coffee and craft shops punctuate the route, from which you can make little detours to nearby Shinto shrines.

Kyoto

Kyoto is the Japan of the imagination – a city of cherry trees, pagoda-roofed temples, geishas and tea ceremonies, all set against a backdrop of lush green hills and fine traditional architecture.

The country's capital for more than a thousand years, it was spared the bombing of World War II and as a consequence has retained an unparalleled wealth of period buildings, from Edo-era wood-fronted houses to glittering medieval shrines crammed with sumptuous art. Something like 2,000 Buddhist temples survive in pristine condition, 17 of them listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Kyoto, however, is no mere living museum. Fostered by centuries of imperial patronage, classical Japanese art and culture still flourish here as nowhere else. The flash of a geisha's silk kimono is a routine sight amid the *machiya* houses and cobbled backstreets of the city's five *hanamachi* ('pleasure neighbourhoods'). Flower arrangement, rock gardening and the arcane costumes of Noh drama can still be experienced in their authentic contexts by visitors, and the local cuisine is in a league of its own.



Shiraume Ryokan

If you stay in only one ryokan while in Kyoto, let it be the Shiraume. Located deep inside the historic pleasure district of Gion, the inn occupies a former *ochaya*, where *geikos* and *maikos* entertained clients in the Edo period. The building is approached via a small footbridge flanked by plum trees, and in spring languishes amid a backdrop of blossom and green willows growing along the banks of the Shirakawa stream. Inside, its rooms are adorned with beautiful Japanese antiques and artworks. The atmosphere is painstakingly traditional, providing the perfect base for explorations of Kyoto's cultural riches.





World of Willow & Flowers

Geishas in Kyoto

It comes as a surprise to many visitors to discover that the rarefied, arcane world of the Japanese geisha is still very much a living part of the country's cultural scene, and nowhere is this more true than in Kyoto, where these elaborately costumed female entertainers prefer to be known as 'geiko'.

The tradition dates back centuries, but took its present form during the 1760s, when a separate class of artistes emerged from the murky underworld of the *odoriko* (dancing girl) and *oiran* (courtesan). Geishas were highly trained performers, erudite and accomplished in the arts of classical music, dance, poetry, games and conversation. They were employed as private entertainers in upper-class homes and special geisha houses. Contrary to popular perception in the West, however, sex was rarely on the menu!

Today, geishas are in greater demand than ever, particularly in Kyoto, where wealthy industrialists and politicians pay huge sums to be entertained in high style at one of the city's famous *okiya* ('geisha houses'). These are located in five different pleasure districts, or *hanamachi* (literally 'flower towns'), ranked according to a strict hierarchy, with those in the district of Gion Kobu at its apex.

Unless you've a deep enough wallet to sponsor your own geisha evening at an *ochaya* (tea house), your best chance of experiencing the refined 'flower and willow world' (*karyukai*) of the Japanese geisha is to attend one of the regular performances of music and dance staged in Kyoto's theatres and studios (your TransIndus guide will know when and where these take place). Some visitors, and even locals, often hang around the backstreets of Gion, Paparazzi-style, between 4 and 6pm, hoping to catch a glimpse of a *geiko* or *maiko* ('apprentice') on her way to an evening engagement.





Mount Koya & The Kii Peninsula

The Kii Peninsula - 'Kii-hanto' in Japanese - is a mountainous region southeast of Osaka that's little explored by foreigners, but which boasts a fabulously wild, rocky coastline of pine-studded bays, and some beautiful pilgrimage sites nestled in ancient cedar forest. Emperors, pilgrims and pleasure seekers have since the 6th century AD travelled to this remote area for a restorative dip in its numerous onsen hot springs, and to follow the trails winding inland to Kii's ancient Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples.

The highest concentration of sacred sites in the region is scattered over the wooded top of Koyasan (Mount Koya), where for centuries the samurai used to come to learn esoteric secrets from the resident monks. Although sporting a veneer of modernity, the mountain's shrines and pathways are still charged with the spiritual ambience of old Japan, especially when the mist swirls through its dense, black cedar forests. To experience the magical atmosphere of Koyasan after dark, we recommend clients spend a night in one of the simple pilgrims' lodgings run by its many temples.



Hongu Taisha

Towering cedar trees and fluttering white pennants bearing Shinto inscriptions flank the long, stepped approach to the beautiful Hongu shrine, one of the three principal shrines on the Kii pilgrimage circuit. Its wooden construction and classic, upswept roofs, clad in mossy shingles of local cedar, lend a wonderfully natural feel to the complex, which remains a busy place of worship.

A kilometre away stands another of the region's great sights: the mighty Oyunohara torii - Japan's largest torii gateway. Its giant beams loom 34m (111ft) above the surrounding ricefields, marking the entrance to the sacred Kumano region.

Yunomine

At the head of a narrow, wooded valley, Yunomine comprises a pretty cluster of onsen and ryokan guest houses where, traditionally, Kumano pilgrims bound for the Hongu Taisha, an hour's trek up the mountain, would take a ritual hot water bath. The oldest pool here, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is believed to have been in use for over 1,800 years. It lies next to the stream in a rocky grotto protected by a little wooden hut. Tickets for 30-minute dips in the pool are in great demand. Nearby, another spring is set aside for cooking eggs and sweet potato - the classic pilgrim's lunch in the village.



The Kumano Kodo

The network of trails connecting the three principal shrines of the Kii Peninsula is known as the 'Kumano Kodo'. Wearing traditional white robes, Japanese pilgrims have for many centuries trodden its lichen-covered pathways, crossing forests of cedar and cypress, tea terraces, waterfalls, rivers and groves of mikan orange trees to worship at the three grand shrines of Hongu, Nachi and Hatayama. The shrines were originally associated with Shintoism, but later attracted Buddhists and Shugendo practitioners. Today, they're protected as UNESCO World Heritage Sites and remain places of great spiritual significance.

The most iconic of all is the 3-storey, pagoda-style Seiganto-ji Temple, located close to the famous Nachi Falls with a backdrop of white water plunging from a cliff top. Spend the night close by, and you can be here to witness morning spiritual rituals. We recommend a night on the trail, sleeping in a traditional ryokan. Led by an English-speaking guide, you'll visit sacred sites, pausing to bathe in hot springs and take part in local activities. Lunch will be a fragrant bento box of sushi and *teriyaki*, and dinner a *kaiseki* meal served in high Japanese style.



Kyushu

Although only a slender, kilometre-wide channel separates Kyushu from Honshu, the island is considered by most Japanese as a backwater. Yet its shores are where Buddhism and Christianity first entered the archipelago, along with knowledge of gunpowder and writing from China. This cultural cross-pollination also left in its wake a wealth of historic monuments, from samurai castles to ancient rock-cut shrines, set against a backdrop of lush, sub-tropical vegetation and volcanic peaks spewing ash and steam. The intensely geothermal interior of Kyushu encompasses landscapes of almost surreal beauty. Bounded by wide horizons of snow-capped volcanoes, a vast, rolling grassland is broken by thickets of bamboo, flower-filled pastures and pretty farming villages. At its heart rises Mt Aso, one of the largest active volcanoes in the world, with a caldera measuring 80 miles (150km) in circumference. Clouds of sulphurous steam belch from the blue-green lake hidden inside the summit cauldron of this smoking giant, whose rim you may be able to scale on foot, by car or via a ropeway to experience one of the country's most dramatic panoramas.



Nagasaki

One of Kyushu's principal cities, Nagasaki has a long history of contact with mainland China and the West - a fact vividly reflected in its cosmopolitan architecture. Chinese Taoist temples, Confucian shrines and Catholic churches punctuate a skyline which had to be largely reconstructed after 1945, when an American nuclear attack killed an estimated 65,000 people here. The tragedy is commemorated in Nagasaki's Atomic Bomb Museum, whose most poignant exhibit is a clock stuck at 11:02am, the precise moment of the explosion.

Yakushima

Pristine wilderness is not something one necessarily associates with Japan. But from the deep blue, subtropical seas 37 miles (60km) off the coast of Kyushu rises a small, mountainous and astonishingly lush island all but forgotten by the wider world, yet whose interior harbours a landscape both ancient and unique - one of the country's true natural wonders. Not a single tree has been felled on Yakushima for over half a century. As a consequence, its rain-soaked, mist-shrouded core is cloaked with mystical forests of moss-covered Japanese cedar, some specimens over a thousand years old. One - the venerable 'Jomon Sugi' - is believed to have been a sapling while Plato was still alive, over 2,300 years ago!

Long, multistage hikes into the forests, gorges and granite crags of Yakushima's centre are the main incentive to travel to the island. A network of paved trails and huts makes trekking a joy, though walkers need to come well equipped for inclement weather. This is officially the wettest place in Japan, with some parts receiving eight and ten metres of rainfall annually.



Kagoshima

With its spectacular setting on a deep blue bay facing a smouldering volcano, Kagoshima is one of Japan's most alluring and exotic cities. The ranks of palm trees lining its streets attest to the mildness of the local climate - one of the factors that first attracted European traders and missionaries to the area in the 16th century. A legacy of this early contact with the West is the prominence of sweet potatoes in the local cuisine (introduced by the Portuguese from Brazil via Goa). Aside from taking the place of rice, orange and purple yams are also used to produce Kagoshima's signature tippie, *shochu*, which is made in several distilleries around the city. The secret behind the sweet potato's success is the stupendously fertile soil, resulting from centuries of volcanic deposits from nearby Mount Sakurajima. Clouds of ash still erupt daily from the summit of the volcano just across the water, an awe-inspiring spectacle - though a bane for local car owners! You can get close to Sakurajima by jumping on a ferry across Kagoshima harbour. A network of roads and trails lead to various observation points surveying the main crater.





Shikoku

The smallest of Japan's four main islands, Shikoku remains an enigma to most Japanese, and sees comparatively few foreign visitors. Yet anyone seeking a glimpse of old Asia would do well to consider a foray into its remote, thickly forested interior, whose valleys enclose a forgotten world of tiny farmsteads, swaying vine bridges, hill shrines and misty cedar woods criss-crossed by ancient paved trails - like a vision from a Japanese folk tale.

Some of these antique pathways form sections of the famous 88-Temple Pilgrimage Route, a 750-mile (1,200-km) circuit of the island whose followers don distinctive white robes and pointed straw hats for the duration of their journey. In the national psyche, Shikoku is equally famous as the home of the humble udon rice noodle, which originated here and is the perfect preamble for another legendary Shikoku speciality, seared bonito tuna, which local restaurants serve with wafer-thin slices of ginger, garlic and green onion.



Matsuyama

Surveying the town of Matsuyama on Shikoku's north coast is one of the country's largest and best preserved medieval citadels. The hilltop complex dates from the early 16th century, and ranks among the most compelling of its kind in Japan. Climb the flight of stone steps or jump in a cable car to reach its fortified main gate. It's well worth allowing time for the little museum in the keep, where visitors can dress up in authentic samurai costume. The town also holds one of the country's most famous bath houses, the thousand-year-old 'Dogo Onsen'. Matsuyama's other, rather less imposing, claim to fame is that it is Japan's 'Custard Tart Capital' - a legacy of the city's trade links with Portuguese merchants. Local variations feature delicious Shikoku chestnut or red bean paste.



Takamatsu

Facing the Seto Inland Sea on Shikoku's north coast, Takamatsu is the island's main gateway. Under the Tokugawa shogun, the town enjoyed a long and prosperous peace, during which time the renowned Ritsurin Koen was created in the grounds of the 16th-century castle. Considered one of Japan's finest 'strolling gardens', the park is laid out among stands of black pines, chestnut trees and shimmering lotus ponds spanned by pretty red-lacquer bridges - like a scene from an antique brush and ink painting come to life. Tours invariably culminate with a tea ceremony in one of the Riturin's exquisite wooden teahuts, or 'chashitsu' - our favourite is Edo-period 'Chrysanthemum Moon Pavilion', which juts on to an emerald-green pond framed by flowering trees and low, wooded hills.



The Iya Valley

Lost amid the mountainous interior of Shikoku, the steep-sided, densely wooded Iya Valley encloses a world few Japanese, and even fewer foreigners, realize still exists. It was here members of the Heike clan took refuge after the Genpei War of the 12th century, and where they constructed bridges from wisteria vines that could be cut to protect them in the event of attack. Miraculously, a few of these bridges survive: these days they're reinforced with (invisible) steel cables to make them safe, but still offer a vertigo-inducing experience as you sway 45 feet above the river. A single-track road winds through primeval forest into the remote southeastern end of the Iya Valley, where the farm houses of Ochiai village cascade down the mountainside, connected by ancient 'rido' footpaths.



Hokkaido: 'Land of Fire & Ice'

Hokkaido is Japan's northernmost island, and in terms of climate, landscape and overall atmosphere, quite distinct from the rest of the country. Straddling the Kuril tectonic chain, it is one of Asia's geothermal hot spots, with more than a dozen active volcanoes and countless hot springs, rivers and streams that make for sensational al fresco onsen bathing. Vast tracks of the coast and interior remain pristine, their mountains, gorges, glittering sapphire-blue caldera lakes and old-growth forests protected by six national parks - a true wonderland for walkers and wilderness lovers. Aficionados of fine seafood will also find plenty of inspiration here - the cold waters of the Sea of Othosk are some of the richest in the world, and particularly well stocked with salmon and squid, which local restaurants transform into sublime sashimi.

Nearly half of the island's 5.5 million inhabitants live in the capital, Sapporo, which is well connected with the rest of the country by air. A 33-mile (54-km) railway tunnel (one of the longest and deepest in the world) also runs under the seabed of the Tsugaru Strait, connecting Honshu and Hokkaido, providing a year-round rail link.



Sapporo

The youngest of Japan's major cities with a population of just over 2 million, Sapporo forms an oasis of modern living amid the wilds of Hokkaido. It's a well-groomed and well-organized metropolis, laid out in a grid plan around the Toyohira River and long, leafy Odori Park, which cleaves through the high-rise blocks of downtown towards the outlying mountains.

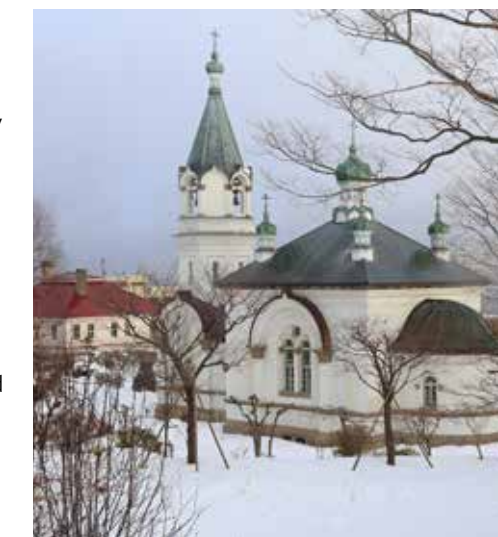
Odori Park plays host to several themed festivals through the year, ranging from a Munich-style 'beer fest' in the summer months (Japan's number-one brand is brewed locally) to 'autumn colours' in September, when the scarlet maples steal the show. The biggest crowds, however, descend for the famous Snow Festival (*Yuki Matsuri*), in February, when the centre is adorned with over 400 ice sculptures and statues, illuminated to spectacular effect after dark. With its vibrant nightlife, fine seafood restaurants and spectacular setting, Sapporo makes the ideal launchpad for explorations of the island.

Hakodate

This attractive coastal city on Hokkaido's southern tip was the first to be colonized by Europeans in the mid-19th century, which explains the presence of so many antique red-brick and clapperboard buildings, including an old British consulate and Russian Orthodox church. The poster piece, however, is the splendid, star-shaped Goryokaku Fort, which is today surrounded by a park lined with ranks of cherry trees - a glorious spectacle in the spring.

The old port town is squeezed on to a spit of sandy land dividing two bays, and with the ocean on three sides, fishing remains central to the life of the city. Check out the day's catch at the bustling 'Asaichi' ('morning market'), where you'll see crabs and shellfish displayed in huge cold water tanks. Customers are invited to hook their own squid, which is sliced into melt-in-the-mouth sashimi as you wait. Seafood rice bowls featuring local salmon roe steeped in soy sauce are the speciality of the restaurants crammed into the nearby Donburi Yokocho Ichiba arcade - a Mecca for Japanese seafood lovers.

In the evening, jump in the cable car up Mount Hakodate, from whose summit a superb view extends over the city and surrounding coastline. The panorama is particularly dramatic at night, when the streets recede to the shadowy mountains in the distance like a giant lake of lights.

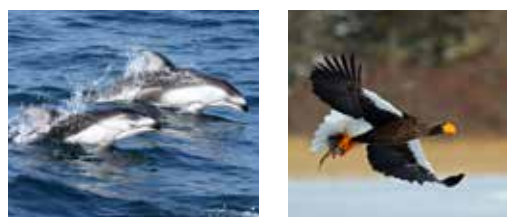


Visiting the Ainu

Before Hokkaido was colonized by the Japanese in the mid-19th century, it was the homeland of the Ainu, an indigenous minority whose descendants still survive in small pockets around the island. Laid low by disease and the loss of their hunting and fishing territories, the Ainu today number between 23,000 and 25,000. Suppression of their shamanic religious practises, dress and language during the Meiji period virtually wiped out their traditional way of life (which was only officially recognized by the Japanese government in 2008) but considerable effort has been made over the past decade to reverse the decline and forge a modern Ainu identity. Several folk museums and numerous permanent exhibitions have duly

been opened across Hokkaido, showcasing the aboriginal minority's material culture and arts, music and dance. The best of them is at Nibutani, a couple of hours' drive from Sapporo on the island's east coast, whose 500-strong community are nearly all full-blooded Ainu. As well as attending a culture show and visiting an old-style thatched lodge, you can stay in a *minshuku* ('B&B') run by a hospitable Ainu family, and eat in a local restaurant serving Ainu-style *muraki* dumplings and venison stew. A good introduction to the community and its history is the Pirka Kotan Cultural Centre on the outskirts of Sapporo, where a large array of artefacts are exhibited in a reconstructed Ainu village.





Flowers, Lakes and Mountains: Hokkaido in Summer

The island's fresh, maritime breezes and uplifting scenery offer the perfect escape from Honshu's heat and humidity in the summer months. Its quiet roads also make it ideal for a self-guided, fly-drive holiday – a great adventure offering a tempting mix of dramatic landscapes and some memorable places to stay, walk and swim. Emblematic of Hokkaido's short summer are the vibrant flower fields around Biei, where huge expanses of lavender and other brightly coloured blooms are framed by views of the Tokachi and Yubari Mountains.

Further east, a succession of stark volcanic mountain ranges and cobalt-blue caldera lakes punctuate the journey through the centre of Hokkaido. Among the finest views here is the one over Lake Mashu, enfolded by soaring cliffs and the graceful slopes of Mount Shari beyond. The

lake is the poster piece of the Akan National Park, whose other great scenic wonder is Lake Akan itself. Whereas the waters of Mashu are famed for their exceptional clarity, Akan is renowned for the balls of green marima algae that form on its bed. In the distance, the smoking summit of an active volcano forms an epic backdrop for boat cruises and canoe trips. Visits may also include tours of a museum dedicated to the local indigenous minority, the Ainu.

For keen walkers, Hokkaido's highest mountain, Mount Asahidake (2,291m/7,516ft), in the Daisetsuzan National Park, offers the island's definitive trek. Beginning with a short cable car ascent, the climb takes you across dramatic scree slopes pockmarked with small calderas belching plumes of sulphurous steam. The views from the summit are superb (weather permitting!).

The prime incentive to press on to the east coast of the island is the rugged Shiretoko promontory – a long chain of volcanic peaks extending into the Sea of Othosk. Most of this distinctive region remains accessible only on foot or by boat, though during the summer, you can travel by road to within striking distance of its standout attraction, the Kamuiwakka River, whose steaming hot waters flow through tiers of turquoise pools and pristine woodland before cascading into the ocean.

Known to the Ainu aboriginal people as 'World's End', Shiretoko also hosts a thriving population of brown bears. Offshore, orcas and sperm whales number among several species of cetacean regularly seen on spotting cruises, which in winter squeeze through packs of sea ice to sight flocks of rare Steller's sea eagles, one of the world's largest raptors, classed by the government as a 'National Treasure'.

Snow & Steam: Hokkaido in Winter

Hokkaido's arctic winter weather transforms life on the island between late November and March, when a thick covering of snow extends all the way to the coastline. Inland, the volcanoes look sublime under their cloak of white powder.

Low-key and uncrowded by international standards, the winter sports scene is nevertheless well developed, with dozens of fully fledged resorts, the finest of them Niseko, often dubbed the 'Whistler of the East' because of its fabulous metre-deep powder, wealth of off-piste possibilities and vibrant nightlife.

The great thing about skiing in Hokkaido is that after a hard day on the slopes you can ease those aches and pains in a steaming hot onsen, while gazing at a magnificent view of Mount Yotei.

Or how about a night in an igloo at the beautiful

ice hotel in Tomamu? Or a snowmobile safari in the wilds of the Daisetsuzan National Park? For children, a trip on an Alaskan husky sled into ice-dusted forests around Takasu will live in their memory forever, as will the fairy-tale visions created for the annual *Yuki Matsuri* ('Snow Festival') in Sapporo.

For the wild at heart, the remote Shiretoko Peninsula offers the chance to experience a polar environment without having to travel to the arctic circle: excursion boats venture from its main town, Rausu, into the drift ice that encrusts the promontory in winter to search for whales and Steller's Eagles. Photographers will also want to make the trip to the southeast of the island for a glimpse of Red-crowned cranes. This giant bird was pushed to the brink of extinction in the 20th century, but now thrives amid the marshes of the Kushiro Wetlands.





Naha

Okinawa's relaxed capital, Naha, is the main point of arrival. Most of the city dates from the post-war period - it was levelled during the American offensive in April 1945 - but extensive reconstruction work in the former Ryukyu capital of Shuri, now a part of Naha city, gives a good sense of the old kingdom's cultural sophistication. A scattering of shrines, royal tombs, stone-paved roads and red-roofed houses with coral walls cluster below the replica castle, whose focal point is the ornate state hall.

Look out for local crafts shops selling hand-loomed textiles, woven from banana fibre.



Okinawa's Secret

Japan boasts the greatest proportion of centenarians in the world, and the largest proportion of them live in the Okinawan Islands. One particular village called Ogimi is home to a dozen people over the age of 100.

Experts have scrutinized the Okinawan lifestyle and concluded that, aside from the obvious health benefits of living close to the sea, the local diet has a lot to recommend it. Researchers discovered that on average, Okinawans consume three portions of fresh fish per week, along with daily portions of wholegrains, vegetables, soy sauce, tofu and konbu seaweed. Rich in anti-oxidant flavonoids, the archipelago's delicious purple sweet potato is also an important staple, while bitter cucumber (*goya*) promotes low blood sugar.

Another finding was that long-lived Okinawans tend to follow the much repeated adage 'hara hachi bu' - 'eat until you're eight tenths full'. Obesity is rare, and with working days much shorter than the rest of the country, stress levels are very low too.

Okinawa

Straggling for over 600 miles (1000km) from Kyushu to within a stone's throw of Taiwan, the sun-drenched Okinawan Islands are Japan's subtropical flipside. The archipelago's climate is blissful; its beaches white and powder soft; its seawater translucent; and people famously laid-back, hip and quirky. Leave the salary-man suit in Tokyo; the national dress here is the Hawaiian-style 'Kariyushi' shirt.

The 159 coral-fringed islands themselves range from large and hilly to remote, jungle-covered outcrops of limestone. Snorkelling, diving and kayaking over turquoise bays and sparkling reefs are the reason most people travel here. But the traditional Ryukyu culture adds a distinctive flavour to any Okinawan holiday. Until 1879, when they were annexed by Japan, the islands formed a semi-autonomous kingdom, whose multiracial roots remain discernible in the local language ('Okinawa-ben'), music (played on the three-stringed *sanshin*), Chinese-influenced architecture and, not least, the local Thai-style rice liquor, *awamori*.

Okinawa may look like just another idyllic beach haven, but it's one with its own distinctive style and atmosphere, offering the perfect wind-down after a tour of the country's heartlands.



Hoshinoya Resort, Taketomi

Deliciously remote Taketomi requires some effort to reach from Naha, but there's really nowhere else in Japan like it in terms of atmosphere, and this newly built resort perfectly complements the landscape. Set inside the national park, its tile-roofed villas nestle behind low walls of rough, bleached, white limestone, which ensures maximum privacy. The interiors are fragrant, informal and natural: floor-to-ceiling windows, seagrass matting on the floors and natural, mellow-toned woods. Apart from a heated outdoor pool, facilities are minimal - most guests spend their days butterfly spotting, beach combing and exploring the back lanes by bicycle - a blissful prospect.

Nihon Ryori: the Joys of Japanese Cuisine

Like most things in Japan, the country's cuisine – 'nihon ryori' – is refined, distinctive and stylish. Wherever you find yourself, it is exceptionally rare to be served a meal that has not been prepared and presented with considerable care – and which isn't utterly delicious from start to finish!

Fresh seafood, of course, features prominently, but there's a lot more to Japanese cooking than sushi. Most regions and large cities boast their own popular specialities, whether griddle-fried *monjayaki* pancakes in Tokyo, oysters in Miyajima or udon noodles in Matsumoto. And unlike in Europe, where restaurants typically serve a broad range of different dishes, in Japan, places tend to specialize in one particular type of dish, such as sashimi (slices of raw fish) or *okonomiyaki* griddle cakes, to name but two.

Travelling around, you'll probably dine at several different styles of eateries, ranging from over-water terraces in the summer to mobile street stalls and small restaurants specializing in such delights as *shabu shabu* (where thin slices of beef and vegetables are blanched in bowls of bubbling hot water at your table and served with tasty dipping sauces) or *yakitori* – kebabs of chicken and chopped leeks coated in a subtly sweet, sticky sauce – sublime with ice-cold Japanese beer.

No dining experience, however, compares with the full-blown *kaiseki* supper served in traditional ryokan inns and ryotei restaurants. Japan's equivalent of 'haute cuisine', *kaiseki* comprise a dozen or more different elements, drawing heavily on fresh, seasonal, local ingredients. Individual dishes are often small, painstakingly arranged, and served in fine porcelain bowls whose decoration is selected to enhance the appearance and seasonal theme of the meal. *Kaiseki* is regarded as a high art form, where everything from the taste, texture, colour and shape of the food combines to promote a sense of harmony.

A less formal version of the traditional Japanese *kaiseki* is the 'bento' meal – where portions of rice, fish or meat, and accompanying condiments, are packed in a small lunch box. Bentos may be cheap and disposable (such as those served at railway stations or airports), or more fancy, featuring handcrafted lacquer boxes you'll want to keep, or where the food is arranged to resemble popular characters from films, comic books and even video games!



Exploring Japan

Japan's varied topography has presented the country's engineers with some formidable challenges over the years. But in overcoming them, the Japanese have forged a transport infrastructure with few equals in the world. Showpiece of its clean, efficient and punctual rail network is, of course, the Shinkansen 'Bullet Train'. But the standards of road construction are almost as impressive, enabling you to explore the length and breadth of the archipelago in considerable comfort.

When to Go | Japan can be a rewarding destination at any time of year. Each season has its pleasures: relaxing in an outdoor onsen hot tub, with snow weighing down the branches of the surrounding trees in winter; the cherry blossom in spring; dazzling seascapes in summer; and the vibrant colours of the Japan Alps in the autumn. Spanning 20 degrees of latitude, the islands encompass wildly different climate zones. While Hokkaido, in the far north, experiences ferocious, near-arctic conditions from December through March, the subtropical Okinawa Islands in the far south remain balmy and warm year round. It can rain at any time of year, but unlike in the UK, wet weather rarely lasts for longer than a day or two in summer.

International Flights | Our preferred options are British Airways direct services to Tokyo Narita or Tokyo Haneda airports. Japan Airlines and ANA (All Nippon Airways) offer comparable flights. Emirates, Finnair and KLM, who all fly through their respective hubs, are other popular options. Alternative gateways, convenient for some itineraries, are Kansai (in the Osaka area, close to Kyoto) and Fukuoka (for Kyushu island, in the south).

Travel Within Japan | For longer journeys between cities, our tailor-made trips rely mainly on Bullet Trains, which are fast, impeccably well maintained

and reliable, and great value for money (JR Rail Passes help keep costs down). Occasionally, an itinerary may require a short flight or ferry journey. Within cities, you'll mainly use the local metro and bus services, accompanied by a guide if on a sightseeing trip. Day tours can be by taxi, or coaches that pick you up from your hotel at a designated time. Airport transfers are also mainly by coach or minibus.

Self-drive is becoming an ever more popular option, especially for regions such as Hokkaido, in the far north, where the main sights are not easily accessible by public transport. Road conditions are excellent, driving is safe and traffic travels on the left, like in the UK.

Accommodation | The places you stay while travelling around Japan will undoubtedly yield some of the most pleasurable moments of your trip. Standards of accommodation and hospitality are world-beating, while traditional options such as ryokan inns and *minshuku* B&Bs are hugely atmospheric, from the sliding doors, paper walls and tatami floors down to the *kaiseki* meals you are served. In most ryokans, traditional dress is also encouraged (you'll be loaned a yukata – light kimono – to wear for the duration of your stay).



Suggested Itineraries

As with all our tailor-made trips, the itineraries sketched on these pages should only be considered as starting blocks, to be adapted according to your individual needs. It's possible, for example, to tack two or three days of beach time on the end of an itinerary with a stay in a coastal resort or spa town. Or you might wish to make a detour into the Japan Alps to walk along

remnants of the old Edo post road, or venture up to Hokkaido to experience the astonishing volcanic landscapes of the far north. The preceding pages showcase a wealth of options which, with a bit of logistical help from our expert holiday designers in London, may be incorporated into a two- or three-week trip.

Japan Highlights | 13 Days

Japan's signature sights and experiences

This focused, 13-day tour ticks off the great sights of central Honshu, beginning with three nights of acclimatization and sightseeing in the capital. From there, you'll take a short train ride to Hakone to savour the mesmerizing views of Mt Fuji and Lake Ashi, staying at a ryokan inn with its own thermal hot tub. Next, you'll head to the other side of the island to soak up the Edo-period charm of Takayama's antique streets before delving into traditional splendours of Kanazawa and Kyoto – both crucibles of old-world Japanese style and culture. If you're travelling to Japan to see Zen gardens, cross paths with geishas in full regalia, marvel at exotic landscapes and experience Japanese hospitality at its most refined, then this tour is for you.

UK — Tokyo (3 nights) — Hakone — Takayama (2 nights) — Kanazawa (2 nights) — Kyoto (3 nights) — UK



Iconic Japan | 14 Days

A selection of Japan's loveliest locations, with an extended stay in Kyoto

Emphasizing the twin facets of Japan, the pivotal points on this 2-week trip are stays in 'modern' Tokyo and 'traditional' Kyoto. As a stepping stone between the two, you'll spend the night in the idyllic rural village of Tsumago, famed for its Edo-period houses and shops. Four nights in Kyoto allows you to venture well off the beaten track and experience more secluded aspects of this most Japanese of cities: hidden Zen gardens and ridgetop temples; old-style tea shops; and cherry tree-lined canals. Afterwards, a night in the wonderfully old-fashioned ryokan on Miyajima Island enables you to sidestep the crowds again and experience the serenity of one of Japan's most revered Shinto shrines without the crowds. Rounding off the tour is a night in Japan's second city Osaka, from where you fly home.

UK — Tokyo (4 nights) — Tsumago — Kyoto (4 nights) — Miyajima (2 nights) — Osaka — UK



Romantic Japan | 15 Days

The archipelago's most irresistibly romantic locations – an ideal trip for honeymooners

Spend a fortnight luxuriating with a loved one amid picture-book Japanese landscapes, ranging from snow-capped Mt Fuji to the dazzling turquoise bays of the Okinawa Islands – the Far East's own Hawaii. Your first landfall can be at one of our favourite ryokan inns – Gora Kadan in the thermal resort of Hakone – where you'll be able to ease off your jet lag in your own private, spring-fed hot tub with superb valley views. Three nights in Kyoto provide a fix of traditional Japanese culture, from white-faced *maikos* and Kabuki theatre to tea ceremonies in exquisite Zen gardens. Then it's off to the Okinawas for a week of transparent seawater and power soft sand, before returning to Tokyo for your flight back home.

UK — Hakone (3 nights) — Kyoto (3 nights) — Iriomote (3 nights) — Ishigaki (3 nights) — Tokyo — UK



Japan Discovery | 20 Days

The definitive Grand Tour of Japan's highlights, both ancient and modern

Three weeks allows for a more extended and satisfying tour of Japan, giving scope to venture a little off track to regions such as the cedar-cloaked slopes of Mt Koya, with its centuries-old pilgrims' paths and beautiful Shinto forest shrines. The sacred mountain features after 3 nights in Kyoto, and before that, stopovers in Hakone, near Mt Fuji, and Tokyo. In the course of this itinerary you'll also have a taste of big city life in Osaka and Hiroshima, and the opportunity to experience the cream of Japan's traditional architecture of Takayama and Tsumago. A couple of nights in the Japan Alps, and a visit to the snow monkeys of Jigokudani, rounds off the tour before your final night in Tokyo.

UK — Tokyo (2 nights) — Hakone — Kyoto (3 nights) — Mt Koya — Hiroshima (2 nights) — Osaka — Kanazawa (2 nights) — Takayama (2 nights) — Tsumago — Obuse (2 nights) — Tokyo — UK



Southern Explorer | 18 Days

Venture off the beaten track to experience some of Japan's undiscovered gems

Experience the dramatic landscapes and charismatic coastal cities of southern Japan on this varied 18-day tour. After landing in Kyushu's largest city (famed for its delicious noodle soup - ramen) you'll explore the awesome volcanic uplands of the island's heartland, dominated by the profile of the world's largest caldera – Mt Aso – and discover vestiges of the country's first ever contact with European traders at Nagasaki. Gardening enthusiasts will be enthralled by the two 'Great Gardens' featured on this itinerary – at Okayama and Takamatsu – as well as by the dense, deciduous forests of Shikoku's undisturbed interior. Culturally diverse, full of historical interest and boasting some of Asia's most inspiring scenery, this route showcases the best that southern Japan has to offer.

UK — Fukuoka — Nagasaki (2 nights) — Kagoshima (2 nights) — Myoken Onsen — Kumamoto (2 nights) — Hiroshima (2 nights) — Matsuyama (2 nights) — Takamatsu — Okayama (2 nights) — Osaka — UK



Sacred Trails | 15 Days

Magical forest shrines, spectacular medieval palaces and sublime temples – a walk on Japan's spiritual flipside

The Kumano Kodo, on the Kii Peninsula, is Japan's most traditional pilgrimage trail. And, thanks to the fact most of its Shinto and Buddhist shrines nestle amid cedar forest and soaring mountains, its most picturesque. This tour takes the Kumano circuit as its focal point, bookending the experience with visits to the country's two great culture capitals, Kyoto and Nara. Although you'll be transported between some key locations by minibus, the trip does involve a fair amount of moderately strenuous walking, much of it uphill. The payoff is a chance to see a side of the country few foreigners even know exists. You'll be overnighing in a mix of beautiful ryokan inns, candle-lit monasteries and modern hotels.

UK — Nara (2 nights) — Mt Koya (2 nights) — Wakayama — Shirahama — Chikatsuju — Yunomine Onsen (2 nights) — Nachi Taisha — Ise (2 nights) — Kyoto — UK



Hokkaido: Land of Fire and Ice | 15 Days

Adventurous fly-drive tour of Hokkaido's scenic highlights

This itinerary is the only one on our books that's self-driven, for the simple reason that public transport connections to and from Hokkaido's national parks (which hold the most spectacular scenery) are infrequent, even in summer. Driving on Japan's northernmost island, however, is a dream. The roads are quiet, the landscape spectacular from start to finish, and, of course, the Japanese drive on the left. Our route scythes through magnificent mountain uplands, taking in breathtakingly beautiful caldera lakes, includes an ascent of the island's loftiest peak (Mt Asahi) and culminates with two full days exploring Japan's last area of true wilderness, where whales, dolphins and eagles are everyday sights.

UK — Tokyo (2 nights) — Hakodate — Toya Onsen — Sapporo — Asahidake Onsen (2 nights) — Lake Akan — Lake Kussharo — Rausu (3 nights) — Tokyo — UK





South Korea

Located on a dramatic, mountainous peninsula between Japan and China, South Korea presents a curious mix of ancient and modern. Its capital, Seoul, is a teeming megalopolis of skyscrapers, but behind the towers of glass and concrete lurk numerous thousand-year-old vestiges of an illustrious Buddhist civilization every bit as technologically advanced, for its time, as contemporary South Korea is in today's world.

In striking contrast to the cutting-edge modernity of the cities, this is also a country of rugged mountains and pine forest – ideal terrain for treks, biking and winter sports. While the north is alpine in appearance and climate, the south – the region's ginseng belt – is tropical. Rice paddy surrounds snug, farming villages, where you'll see locals in baggy overalls and conical straw hats bending knee-deep in expanses of reflective water and vivid green rice shoots. And the coastline is spectacular too, with numerous white-sand beaches, fringed by coral reefs, turquoise seas and volcanic rock formations.



Highlights of South Korea

Seoul | High-rise, high-tech and high-speed Seoul is racing towards the future, though one whose cutting edges are softened with a handful of old relics, some delightful natural spaces and traditional teashops.

Hahoe | A bumper crop of traditional thatched hanok manor houses survives in the village of Hahoe, several of them converted into delightful guest houses which you can use as bases for explorations of the area.

Gyeongju | The Silla dynasty's former capital on the South Korean coast holds an unparalleled wealth of ancient monuments, as well as a dramatic hinterland dominated by its sacred mountain, Namsan.

Dosan Seowon | Set amid lotus ponds and bamboo forest, this wonderful specimen of 16th-century Confucian architecture, in the forest outside Hahoe, epitomizes the subtle grandeur of Korea's old world.

Jeju Island | Don a loud Hawaiian shirt and you'll fit right in at Jeju Island, South Korea's answer to Maui, where the high rollers from Seoul come to chill on a spectacular volcanic coastline.

Gamcheon, Busan | A polychrome former favela lining the hills behind the country's second city, Busan, now plays host to an inspirational open-air gallery of modern art, featuring vibrant murals and numerous galleries.

Seoraksan National Park | 'Snow Crag Mountain' is Korea's third-highest peak and its coldest area, with abundant wildlife, impressive rock formations and ancient temples protected by a national park.

Mountain Shrines | The hilly far south of the country is strewn with ancient buddhist temples dating from the Silla era, where you can join the resident monks for a taste of monastic life.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+9 hours

Flying time: 11 hours

Currency: South Korean won

Capital: Seoul

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	-4	-2	3	11	16	21	25	27	20	13	6	-2
Rainfall mm	31	20	38	76	81	130	276	267	119	41	46	25
Best to travel	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●	●●	●●	●	●

●● The best time to travel ● A good time to travel ● Low season

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Seoul

A megalopolis of over 10 million people, Seoul feels like a city on a mission. Modernity is undoubtedly the capital's keynote, but recent years have seen efforts to reconnect with its underlying natural landscape and history: the Cheonggye stream bisecting the skyscraper zone downtown has been uncovered to create a delightful green artery, while numerous medieval monuments have seen a well deserved facelift, among them the building designated as National Treasure Number One: the Namdaemun Gate, a grandiose vestige of the 14th-century Joseon dynasty.

Elsewhere, Seoul offers a fabulous choice of places to shop and eat. A great way to experience the capital's quirky cuisine is to join our 'Foodies' tour' of the city, where you'll get a chance to sample such delights as crispy mung bean pancakes and orange *teokbokki* rice cakes, *bibimbap* (rice topped with sautéed vegetables and fermented soybean paste), and the tastiest local kimchi – the quintessential Korean snack.



Palaces & Museums

The Joseon dynasty was also responsible for one of Seoul's other must-sees, Changdeokgung ('Palace of Illustrious Virtue') whose graceful apartments, dating from the 15th and 16th centuries, hold displays of priceless Korean antiques. Descendants of the royals still live in buildings to the rear of the complex, where a secret garden, the Biwon, centres on an octagonal poolside pavilion from where you can gaze over the curvy rooftops and cypress trees to distant Namsan Hill.

Across town, the Gyeongbokgung ('Palace of Shining Happiness') is the oldest and largest palace in Seoul. It served as the Taejo's principal residence until 1592, and retains beautifully well preserved audience halls, gateways and paved courtyards where soldiers in flowing robes and curious false beards perform a changing of the guard ceremony each day.

Gathering together the finest treasures from all three of Seoul's Joseon-era palaces, the National Palace Museum is also located in the Gyeongbokgung, and numbers among its highlights the elaborately gilded and embroidered *hanbok* robes worn by successive generations of Korean kings.

Old Seoul: Bukchon Hanok village

Standing in delightful counterpoint to the high-rise skyline, the district of Bukchon in central Seoul is one of the last surviving residential quarters of the Joseon era. This is where high-ranking civil servants and nobility lived in centuries past, and around 600 old hanok houses, with their traditional curvy roofs and patterned walls, flank the neighbourhood's atmospheric cobbled lanes.

Insadong

Focussed on a central pedestrianized street, this lively district in the city's heart is renowned as the crucible of traditional Korean arts, crafts and antiques, such as fine Goryeo-style celadon ceramics, hanji paper lanterns, calligraphy and embroidery. Half of the country's art galleries are also located here, as well as some atmospheric old tea houses – or *chatjip* – where you can enjoy old-style sticky rice cakes, accompanied by a pot of refreshing quince tea or *sujeonggwa*, a kind of spiced, non-alcoholic fruit punch .



The DMZ

No visit to the capital is complete without a foray north to the infamous DMZ or Demilitarized Zone, separating North and South Korea. For over 50 years, the armies of the two rival states have maintained an uneasy truce along this heavily fortified border, separated by a three-mile-wide buffer zone, which scythes for 160 miles (250km) across the middle of peninsula.

The main showpiece of the DMZ is Panmunjom, an hour's drive north of the capital, where the Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953, and peace talks are still occasionally held. Visitors may also walk the "Third Tunnel of Aggression", one of four subterranean passageways the South Korean government insists the communist regime of the North dug as invasion routes.

Despite the mines and listening posts scattered across it, the absence of human activity within it has ensured the DMZ is now a biodiversity hot spot. Rare red-crowned cranes and even tigers are believed to inhabit this wild limbo land.





Gyeongju

Gyeongju, half a day's journey southeast of the capital, was the seat of the powerful Silla dynasty, who ruled over the region between 57 BC and 935 AD. An exceptional crop of monuments survives as their legacy, the most impressive of them dating from the 7th and 10th centuries. Comprising temples, pagodas, ancient burial sites, statues and gardens, they stand in the shadow of Mt Namsan, Korea's most sacred peak, whose many shrines can be viewed from the pilgrim paths ascending its sides.

Royal Tumuli Park | No less than four UNESCO-listed World Heritage Sites are to be found at Gyeongju. The first is the Royal Tumuli Park – a collection of smooth-sided, grassy mounds in which the Silla Kings lie buried. Many of these tombs remain unopened, but treasures from those that have – including several solid gold crowns, ornamental weapons and the huge 'Emille Bell' – are displayed in the Gyeongju National Museum, along with ceramic items and other religious offerings dredged from the nearby Wolji Pond.



Bulguksa Temple | Gyeongju's crowning glory, however, is the resplendent Bulguksa temple, on the southeast flank of the valley. Nestled amid pine, peach, plum and cryptomeria trees on the lower slopes of Mount Tohamsan, the sprawling Buddhist complex is the oldest and most famous Silla shrine surviving in Korea. Although its richly painted carving dates from the Joseon era, the stonework and deities all originate in the reign of King Gyeongdeok (mid-8th century).

The architect responsible for Bulguksa also designed the exquisite Seokguram grotto, further up the hill, along a shady forest path. Sculpted from white granite and enshrined beneath a domed ceiling on a lotus-bloom pedestal, its centrepiece is a seated Shakyamuni – a sensually carved, eerily lifelike and perfect piece regarded as the highwatermark of Buddhist art in the Far East. The dome above it was built from perfectly carved granite blocks without the use of mortar.



Seoraksan National Park

Seoraksan, in the far northeast of Korea, takes its name from the mountain whose snow-streaked heights form the park's centrepiece. Renowned as much for its floral diversity as its dramatic scenery, the sanctuary is especially popular during the autumn, when Koreans flock here to admire the changing colours. Serene waterfalls and Silla-era Zen shrines are its other attractions.



Millenium Palace Resort & Spa Ragung, Gyeongju

For a break from Western-style luxury, consider a night in this facsimile of a Silla palace, whose design was derived from nearby archaeological sites. Carpenters and wood carvers from across the country were recruited to build the complex, which comprises 16 traditional houses connected by pillared walkways and interlocking courtyards. Each functions like a suite, with its own living room and sleeping area (offering a choice of regular beds or Korean mattresses on under-heated ondol floors), and exclusive onsen tubs, supplied with hot water from an underground spring. It may not be as ancient as it looks, by the Ragung Resort is undeniably romantic.



Andong & Hahoe

The region northwest of Gyeongju, around the provincial town of Andong, has long been one of the most conservative in Korea. Many of the Confucian elite of the Joseon era maintained hanok manor houses in the area from the 16th century, numerous examples of which survive intact. The greatest concentration is to be found in the village of Hahoe, where a pretty ensemble of grey-tiled and thatched houses nestles beside a meander in the Nakdonggang River, against a backdrop of wooded hills.

Although classed as a 'folk village', Hahoe is no museum: 230 people still live here, in much the same way as their ancestors did five or more centuries ago. We recommend you stay for a night in one of the local, family-run guest houses, which will give you ample time to explore Hahoe's bucolic environs on foot or by bicycle, and to experience a recital of 'byeolsingut talnori' - the local dance drama form - costumes for which are displayed in the village's excellent little Mask Museum.



Dosan Seowon

Another highly recommended day trip in the Andong region is to the Dosan Seowon Confucian Academy, founded in 1574 by the sage Yi Hwang on a hillside overlooking the Nakdonggang River. A beautifully preserved collection of antique buildings survives on the site, set amid lotus ponds and bamboo gardens. Conceived to compliment the forms of the surrounding landscape, the architecture is lovingly maintained, down to the vibrant, polychrome paintwork embellishing the curved eaves of the old classrooms. Although the Academy is no longer in use, Confucian rituals are regularly performed here by monks in full traditional regalia.

Busan

Korea's second largest city after Seoul, Busan is the country's principal port, and the departure point for ferries bound for Jeju Island. Koreans flock here for the local beaches in summer, and to sample the seafood at Jagalchi market, where a clutch of small restaurants serve fabulous *hwe* (sliced raw fish). The city is home to the beautiful Haedong Yonggungsa Temple, perched on rocks just above the shoreline near Haeundae Beach, South Korea's answer to Copacabana. The complex, which is a popular place of worship, is overlooked by a striking golden Buddha statue.

One of only a few urban centres not flattened during the war, Busan saw a massive influx of refugees during the conflict, many of whom constructed tiny, favela-style houses on the surrounding hillsides. Known as 'Gamcheon', the largest such district ranked among the poorest neighbourhoods in the country until 2009, when the government invited mural painters and sculptors to spruce up its many empty properties. The result is a spectacular, vibrant, multi-coloured feast of contemporary art - a uniquely uplifting experiment in urban regeneration.



Jeju Island

Often dubbed 'Korea's Hawaii', Jeju is the country's main honeymoon destination and a popular playground for Seoul's jet set. But the island boasts some spectacular scenery too. While the casinos, golf courses and town beaches soak up the crowds, take to the footpaths to discover the amazing volcanic formations of the coastline, or head through the citrus orchards lining the slopes of Hallasan (1,950m/6,397ft), Korea's highest peak, to reach an ancient Buddhist temple. Udo, an islet off the northeastern shore, is where you'll find white-sand coral beaches lapping black-rock cliffs. Divers and snorkelers, meanwhile, head for the city of Seogwipo, on the south coast, which has the warmest seas in Korea and some superb coral reefs.

The Haenyeo of Jeju | Jeju and the small islands off its shoreline are also the domain of an extraordinary band of all-female, freediving grandmothers, known in Korea as 'Haenyeo', who for centuries have dived in the rough waters of the Japan Sea to collect sea urchins and other delicacies. Many are over 70!





Mountain Shrines of the South

Hidden away in the wooded hills of the peninsula's far south are a scattering of ancient temples dating from the Silla era, where monks took refuge during the anti-Buddhist pogroms of the Joseon Dynasty. Set amid some of the loveliest landscapes in all of Asia, the temples are popular today as weekend destinations among Koreans, but see few foreign visitors, despite their exotic pagoda architecture and priceless art treasures many contain.

Jikjisa | Surrounded on all sides by a forest of maple and giant pines, Jikjisa on Hwangaksan Mountain is one of the oldest Buddhist shrines in Korea. It is renowned for its sumptuous decor, and collection of 1,000 white Buddhas.

Haeinsa | Nestled on a high balcony in the Gaya Mountains of South Gyeongsang Province, Haeinsa is one of Korea's three most revered temples, thanks to the presence in its library of the famous Tripitaka Koreana, a compendium of Buddhist scriptures regarded as a national treasure.

Most open their doors to paying guests – a great opportunity to experience monastic life from the inside. You'll share meals and discuss religious philosophy with the monks, attend rituals in the prayer hall, partake in tea ceremonies and go on meditation walks in the forest. The food is simple, nourishing, vegetarian fare. Nights are spent on thin mats laid over heated ondol floors. The following mountain shrines are our favourites:

Tapsa | A lung-stretching trek up flights of wood and stone steps brings visitors to Korea's quirkiest Buddhist monument, the Gaudiesque Tapsa Temple. The complex consists of 80 drystone tower-pagodas constructed by a single monk in the early 20th century.

Geumsansa | Framed by cherry trees and Himalayan pines, this temple in Gimje city is deservedly regarded as Korea's most picturesque. Its focal point is a huge, gilded Mireuksa (Maitreya) Buddha.

Exploring South Korea

Comparatively few travellers from Europe visit South Korea, but the country ranks among the most varied, welcoming and culturally fascinating in the Far East. Traditions of hospitality remain strong. The transport system is first rate. And a wealth of unique traditions, festivals and historic monuments survive, and are easily accessible. Much of the pleasure in traveling here, however, lies in the discovery of offbeat gems: remote temples, pretty farming hamlets and elegant hanok mansions in the hills of the interior, where the centuries-old, Confucian-influenced way of life continues to thrive.

When to Go | South Korea's climate is one of extremes, with ferociously cold, dry winters (dominated by Siberian weather systems) and hot summers (when humidity off the Pacific holds sway). Spring (April-early May) and autumn (September-October) are the ideal times for travel.

International Flights | British Airlines, Korean Air and Asiana all fly non-stop from London and are our preferred options. Flight time is around 11hrs. Flying indirectly, via the hubs of carriers such as KLM, Air France or Lufthansa, is slightly less expensive but will increase travel time. Ask one of our consultants for advice on the most convenient options. With KLM, for example, you'll have a layover of around two hours, taking the overall travelling time to between 13 and 14 hours.

Travel Within South Korea | Most of your travel will be in a private, chauffeur-driven saloon car, with a driver and English-speaking guide who will remain with you for the duration of your tour. We also occasionally use high-speed trains for longer journeys, and one or two domestic flights (notably if you visit Jeju Island).

Accommodation | Standards of accommodation and service are very high throughout the country. A typical TransIndus holiday will, depending on budget and preferences, involve a mix of stays in carefully chosen, luxury 4- and 5-stars, and more down-to-earth, characterful, family-run, hanok-style hotels and B&Bs, where you'll gain a more vivid insight into rural life in South Korea.



Suggested Itinerary

As with all our tailor-made trips, the itinerary outlined below should only be considered as a starting block, to be adapted according to your individual needs. It's common, for example, to tack two or three days of beach time on the end of an itinerary with a stay in a coastal resort on Jeju Island. Or you

might wish to make a detour to the far south of the country to explore the extraordinary mountain temples. The preceding pages showcase a wealth of options which, with a bit of logistical help from our expert holiday designers in London, may be incorporated into any two- or three-week trip.

South Korea Explorer | 12 Days

Exotic Confucian monasteries, ancient archeological treasures and a pulsating Asian megacity

Just shy of a fortnight in duration, this 12-day tour offers exceptional variety. You'll begin in the capital, acclimatizing with visits to the city's superb palaces, museums and atmospheric arts and antiques enclave of Insadong, with its old-style tea shops, and perhaps a trip out to the DMZ. From Seoul, your tour then swings northeast, delving into the country's most spectacular mountain landscapes at the Seoraksan National Park, before heading to the central region of the peninsula at Andong, famed for its picturesque thatched villages and traditional hanoks. Your final halt before returning to the capital for your flight home is the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Gyeongju, at the foot of sacred Mt Namsan, whose tombs and temples span over a millennium of Korean history. In short, this route covers the country's essential sights – allow an additional 4 or 5 days for a detour south to the mountain temples and subtropical beaches of Jeju Island.



UK — Seoul (3 nights) — Seoraksan NP (2 nights) — Andong (Hahoe) — Gyeongju (3 nights) — Seoul — UK



Taiwan

If one journey could be said to sum up the contradictions and joys of travel in Taiwan, it's the twenty-minute cable-car ride from the capital, Taipei, into the surrounding hills. As the skyline of the pulsating modern city gives way to the tops of fir trees, a tranquil world of temples, ornamental gardens and tea houses takes over. Seated on a stone-lined terrace, you can gaze through gaps in the mist at the distant metropolis over a bowl of sweet plums and cups of finest Oolong tea, poured from terracotta pots with bamboo handles.

Contrary to the country's high-tech image, traditional oriental pleasures tend to provide the defining moments of trips to this distinctive island, located off the coast of southeast China, where visitors can experience the contrasts as well as similarities between the two neighbouring nations. Watch shaven-headed monks lighting incense in ancient Shinto shrines; admire the afterglow reflected on the glassy waters of Sun Moon Lake; trace the arc of an eagle's flight high above the marble crags of the Taroko Gorge; or sample pungent "thousand-day eggs" beneath the ancient cypresses of the Yushan range. Comparatively few foreign tourists explore this little visited island, but Taiwan has plenty to keep one enthralled for weeks.



Highlights of Taiwan

Taroko Gorge | Follow the turquoise waters of the Liwu River up the Taroko Gorge, Taiwan's premier visitor destination and most spectacular landform.

Sun Moon Lake | An hour's drive inland from the tranquil eastern plain, Sun Moon Lake offers an idyllic retreat in the lap of spellbinding alpine scenery.

Alishan National Park | Alishan is one of seven national parks in Taiwan, and a popular refuge from the city, thanks to its spectacular mountain scenery and famous forest railway.

Highway 11 | With its backdrop of imposing cliffs, wooded mountains and glorious beaches, the drive down Taiwan's east coast ranks among the most spectacular in Asia.

National Palace Museum | During the Chinese civil war, the most valuable treasures of the Forbidden City were taken to Taipei for safekeeping, where they remain - the world's finest collection of Chinese art.

Kenting National Park | Occupying a windswept promontory at the island's far southern tip, this park is famed above all for its heavenly tropical beaches and powerful Pacific breakers - a surfer's paradise.

Tea Houses, Taichung | Southern Taiwan's culture capital has reinvented the Chinese tea ceremony, and the city's cafés are the place to savour Alishan's golden Oolong and other local brews.

Orchid Island | Soak up the laid-back, faintly Polynesian atmosphere of this tropical island off the south coast, famed for its beaches and distinctive boats of the local minority people, the Tao.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+8 hours

Flying time: 16.30 hours

Currency: New Taiwan dollar

Capital: Taipei

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	15	15	18	21	25	28	29	29	27	23	20	17
Rainfall mm	86	135	178	170	231	290	231	305	244	122	66	71
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●

●● The best time to travel ● A good time to travel ● Low season

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National Palace Museum

Chinese tourists pour across the straits in particularly large numbers to admire the treasures of the National Palace Museum, most of which originated in Beijing's 'Forbidden City' and are widely regarded as the finest single collection of Chinese art in the world. The items, which include ceramics, paintings, sculpture and ancient bronze pieces, formerly belonged to the Qing Emperors. They were brought here for safe keeping during the Chinese Civil War and have remained in Taiwan ever since.

The museum has to be the only one in Asia whose prize exhibits are both representations of food items: one a cabbage, and the other a piece of boiled pork. The 'Jadeite Cabbage' is exquisitely fashioned from a chunk of green and white jade, while the 'Meat-shaped Stone' was carved from a single piece of banded jasper.



The Temple Trail

An unexpected highlight of Taipei is the wonderful array of traditional Chinese temples surviving in some of its older districts, which are the focus of colourful rituals and celebrations – a fascinating counterpoint to the modern city. Foremost among them is the Confucius Temple, a fine example of Minnan (Southern) style architecture dating from the 1920s, whose ornate, sweeping roofs are set in beautiful parkland. Another favourite is the atmospheric Longshan Temple, dedicated to the Buddhist Goddess of Compassion, which was built in 1730 and resides in the oldest district of Taipei, Wanhua. The shrine is renowned for its wood carving, stone sculpture and bronze antiques. Surrounding it is a grid of narrow streets packed full of little shops selling calligraphy, herbal medicines and incense, as well as pilgrims dressed in traditional black robes.



Taipei

On the northern side of the island, Taiwan's high-rise capital is a pulsating, modern metropolis of 2.7 million, but one still very much in touch with its natural and spiritual hinterland. Ridges of green mountains surround the city, providing a ready escape from the hubbub of downtown, as well as some of the finest skyline views in Asia. It was founded around 300 years ago, but only really got into its stride during the Japanese occupation, which began in 1895 and came to an end after World War II, when Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang made the city their capital. Today, Taipei ranks among Asia's economic powerhouses, and one of the most visited cities in the Far East – in no small part due to the capital's fabulous museum.

It's also an important hub for the country's performing arts scene – especially dance. Taiwan's most acclaimed companies have their own theatres, hosting regular performances influenced by Taiwanese martial arts, Taoist philosophy and traditional drumming.



The Landis

Located in a grand Art deco building in the city centre, the Landis is a landmark hotel from top to toe. Fusing old world elegance with contemporary chic, its rooms are spacious and light: soothing modern colour schemes and lovely designer marble bathrooms show the odd Retro 1930s touch but the styling doesn't feel overdone. Go for a 'Deluxe' room you'll get a terrific view over the nearby Ximending shopping district, home of Taipei's smartest stores and boutiques. We also love the Landis for its fabulous Chinese restaurant, which specializes in Huangzhou-style slow-braised 'Don Po' pork and stir-fried shrimps in tea leaves – melt in the mouth gourmet cuisine.



Jiufen

Usually combined in the same day trip as Yehliu is the village of Jiufen (or 'Chiufen'). Nestled at the foot of a green sugar-loaf mountain, its higgledy-piggledy cluster of buildings date mostly from the late-Qing era and Japanese occupation, when it formed the focus of a gold rush. Retro-style Chinese cafés have sprung up in the picturesque old streets, which began attracting tourists after they were used as a location in the hit 1989 movie, *A City of Sadness*, about Taiwan's infamous 'White Terror' period. The best are clustered along Jishan Street, where local specialities include fragrant roasted wild mushrooms and fish ball soup. Afterwards, settle into one of the wooden booths at the Jiufen Teahouse, which occupies the former headquarters of the town's gold mining company, and is famous for its speciality local teas, and delicious pineapple cake.



Yehliu

On the far northeastern side of the island, the Yehliu Promontory extends 1,700m (5,577ft) into the Pacific - a giant layer cake of sedimentary rocks which the waves, wind and rain have eroded into a phantasmagoria of weird shapes. Outcrops resembling mushrooms, ginger roots and candles are to be found in profusion, and there are a handful of even odder formations in the shape of fairy shoes, beehives and a much photographed 'Queen's Head'.

Sun Moon Lake

Numerous hiking and biking trails thread through and around the forested shoreline of Sun Moon Lake, where hotels, restaurants, temples and shrines vie with each other for the best views of the mountains. Tiny Lalu Island, in the centre of the lake, holds a solitary shrine belonging to the Shao aboriginal people whose traditional land this is. The lake's name derives from the fact its eastern shore resembles a sun, while its western edge is believed to look like a moon.

Overlooking the lake is a particularly luxurious hotel, The Lalu, which was built over the vestiges of a holiday home used at various times by the Japanese Crown Prince and President Chiang Kai-shek. Materials from the original structure have been ingeniously incorporated into its modern replacement, which offers sleek water-facing suites with huge picture windows and more exclusive courtyard pool villas.



Taroko Gorge

A deep trench between snow-capped mountains, the Taroko Gorge will come as a big surprise to anyone who comes to Taiwan expecting wall-to-wall skyscrapers. You can drive up it via a route carved along the foot of the mighty marble crags by the Japanese army at the end of World War II, but to make the most of the abundant local wildlife, trekking along one of the many waymarked trails in the area is the way to go. Dense vegetation and clumps of hanging forest tumble down the cliffs, which shelter an estimated half of all the species of animals, birds, insects and plants present in Taiwan. For hikers, a wonderful trail winds up the valley, passing a series of Buddhist shrines, cascades, grottoes and tunnels, before reaching the famous 'Water Curtain Cave', in which streams of water pour through the ceiling.



Alishan National Park

Renowned for its 2,000-year-old cypress trees, the Alishan National Park is situated at the foot of Jade Mountain (3,952m), the highest point in northeast Asia. A metalled road runs all the way to Alishan itself, but a more atmospheric way to reach the park is on the old narrow-gauge Forest Railway, which twists and turns through lush banana groves, bamboo forest and pine woods. An obligatory stop en route is the village of Fenqihu, whose historic main streets are lined with antique wooden shops and narrow alleys, where you can sample cups of piquant wasabi coffee and local tea, as well as "stinky tofu" and other eye-watering mountain delicacies. The absolute 'must do' here though is the predawn train ride to the summit of Chushan Mountain to watch the sunrise, followed by a leisurely descent on foot.

Silks Place, Taroko

A heavenly retreat high in the hills of northeast Taiwan, Silks Place is the only hotel actually within the boundaries of the Taroko National Park, with its dramatic forested ridges and cliffs. You can enjoy the vistas from the confines of your own thermal plunge pool, or a Jacuzzi on the rooftop deck. There are also large indoor and outdoor pools, as well as a workout and yoga room whose enormous window frames expansive views. The decor is suave and modern - all clean lines and earthy hues. Recitals of folk music and dance, staged nightly around a campfire, are an added attraction.



Maolin National Scenic Area

Immediately inland from Taitung, the Maolin National Scenic Area occupies a nexus of deep river valleys, surrounded by dramatic, wooded mountains that are rich in wildlife and flora. In 2009 this idyllic region was devastated by a typhoon. Many of its villages had to be relocated. One large settlement, however, survived the storm, and serves as a target for trips into this spectacular area. Located at an altitude of 1,000m, Wutai, in Pingtung County, comprises half a dozen hamlets inhabited by members of the Rukai indigenous minority. Many of the houses are built in traditional style, of dry slate, and if you're lucky you'll meet locals wearing hand-woven tunics, accompanied by headdresses with fronds of bracken stuffed into them for good luck.



Highway 11

Facing the pounding surf of the Pacific, Taiwan's rugged east coast forms the island's wild side. The journey along it, between Hualien and Taitung on Highway 11, squeezes along a coastal strip of towering cliffs and dramatic bays, and ranks among the most spectacular drives in Asia. On clear days, you can see 'Green' or 'Lutao' Islands offshore - Taiwan's answer to Robben Island, where high-profile political prisoners were incarcerated by the Kuomintang.



Orchid Island

'Orchid' ('Lanyu') Island, off Taitung City, is a beautiful volcanic outcrop edged by sparkling blue seas - think the Scottish Hebrides, only with a tropical climate. Separated from the mainland by the choppy waters of the Bashi Channel, it is the traditional home of the Tao (or Yami) indigenous people, whose handsome red-and-white canoes, with their distinctive upturned prows, may be seen on local beaches, adding a faintly Polynesian feel to the gloriously unspoilt scenery. The slow pace of life and wonderful local seafood make Lanyu one of Taiwan's unsung highlights.



Kenting

Encircled on three sides by the ocean, Kenting National Park occupies the windswept Hengchun Peninsula in Taiwan's far south - a promontory famous, above all, for its wonderful golden sand beaches and clear, coral-fringed seas. You can drive around the twisting coast road for a taste of the area's varied marine landscapes, or head inland to the forest, where rare Purple Butterflies flit through the tropical vegetation. Foodies should also make time for Houbihu Harbour, whose row of seafood restaurants work wonders with the catch landed at the nearby jetties: the local sashimi is in a league of its own.



Tainan

With a history of international trade dating back more than four centuries, Tainan, in the southwest of the island, has retained more of a period patina than other Taiwanese cities. It was founded in 1624, when the Dutch East India Company (VOC) erected a fort on a prominent sandbar overlooking the entrance to what would become a thriving harbour.

Vestiges of both European and Ming rule survive in the lanes of the Anping Fort district, on the west side of town facing the sea. Opposite the entrance to the citadel stand some of the many food stalls and cafés which have made Tainan famous across the country as the 'City of Snacks'. Look out for crunchy deep-fried squid rolls - the island's answer to Japanese tempura - and places serving Danzai oil noodles, a flavour-packed pick-me-up made from minced pork and shrimp broth.

Newest among the city's attractions is the recently inaugurated Chimei Museum, the brainchild of a local plastics tycoon who paid \$63 million to construct a palace in which to display his personal art and antiques collection. Set in expansive landscaped grounds, the complex centres on a grandiose, white-painted Neoclassical building, whose exhibition of Western art includes an El Greco and a Rodin bronze. An impressive array of arms, armour and musical instruments are also on show. The museum gardens are a popular place for a stroll and picnic in the summer months, particularly on weekends.

Kaohsiung

Kaohsiung, Taiwan's second city, is a popular stop on tours around the south of the island. Known in Dutch times as 'Tancoya', it expanded rapidly during the Japanese era to become one of the world's largest container ports, and now boasts a population of 2.8 million.

Numerous vestiges of the city's historic past endure in the old quarters of Zuoying, Yancheng and on Cijin Island, with its sweeping views across the water of Kaohsiung's skyline. Dominating the panorama is the prong-shaped profile of the Tuntex 85 Sky Tower, Taiwan's second-tallest, and most quirky building. The structure derives its unusual form from the Chinese character denoting 'tall', which also happens to be the first character of the city's name.

More fine vistas extend from the top of nearby Shaochuantou Hill, where the former British Consulate at Takao stands as a reminder of a brief period in the 1860s when Queen Victoria ruled supreme over the territory. Today, the handsome old red-brick residence houses a smart café and art gallery.





Fo Guang Shan Monastery

The northeastern outskirts of Kaohsiung City are home to the country's largest monastery complex, Fo Guang Shan. Comprising a huge assemblage of ornately decorated prayer halls, gardens and shrines interconnected by bougainvillea-lined walkways, the monastery was founded in the time of the Tang Dynasty, although most of what you see today dates from the 20th century. Its focal point is a towering, 36-metre-tall golden Buddha. Many TransIndus clients have enjoyed spending the night at the simple, but air-conditioned and en suite Pilgrims' Lodge at Fo Guang Shan, which allows you to be in place for the atmospheric early morning prayer session in the main assembly hall – an unforgettable experience.



The Mazu Pilgrimage

Mazu, 'Goddess of the Sea and Seafarers', is Taiwan's patron saint. The round, black-faced deity occupies a position in the local culture comparable to that of the Virgin in Catholic countries, but with one major difference: the Taiwanese worship her with extraordinary fervour. Each year, a mass pilgrimage takes place in which more than 200,000 devotees, brandishing bunches of smouldering incense sticks and yellow pendants emblazoned with dragons and sacred Taoist symbols, trek 217 miles (350km) between key Mazu shrines, following an effigy of the Goddess borne aloft on a golden palanquin. The event is watched by literally millions lining the route, and includes parades, performances of traditional dance and firework displays at each of the temples visited.

The stage of the pilgrimage we recommend clients visit to watch the procession, is Changhua. Here, local gangs compete with each other to waylay the Goddess so that she will spend more time in their

neighbourhoods, thereby bringing good luck for the coming year. They do this by handing out truck-loads of firecrackers to onlookers, using the din and fog of smoke to force the cortège to stop. On occasions, groups of spirit mediums may also attempt to kidnap Mazu and take her back to their temples.

Elsewhere, troupes of lion dancers, wandering oracles, masked acrobats and scantily clad girls gyrating on electric floats also make appearances. Local people open their garages and gardens to accommodate the legions of footsore pilgrims, who are fed along the pathway with free donations of congee porridge and other revitalizing snacks. The whole atmosphere of the festival is unreservedly generous and joyful, and we highly recommend visiting the island when it is taking place. The precise dates fluctuate, but usually fall in April. Contact one of our specialist consultants for more details.

Exploring Taiwan

Taiwan packs a lot of interest into an area that's on a perfect scale for a varied, two-week tour. Journeys are rarely long and they're nearly always scenic, whether you are gliding down the coast roads, climbing into the hills inland or following the main highways between cities. The choice of hotels and guest houses is excellent, too, with consistently high standards of service. Offering a refreshing mix of sea and mountain, often in close proximity, as well as distinctive, exotic culture that stands in marked contrast to its image as a predominantly modern, urbanized island, Taiwan is guaranteed to inspire and surprise in equal measure.

When to Go | Taiwan's subtropical weather is strongly influenced by the annual monsoon, which lasts from May through September, when heavy downpours may occur almost anywhere. Summers are warm and humid. Winters are cool and mostly dry, though rarely chilly other than up in the mountains where snowfall is common from late-November until March. The north of the island tends to be a few degrees cooler, and sees considerably more rain, than the tropical south.

International Flights | Taiwan's national carrier, Eva Air, is our preferred option. It's popular 'Premium Economy' class offers more spacious seating, personalized service and high-quality meals as standard. There are no direct flights from UK. Eva fly to Taipei with a brief stopover in Bangkok. Total flight time is 16hrs 30min.

Alternative long-haul airlines flying to Taipei's Taoyuan International airport include KLM (via Amsterdam Schipol), Cathay Pacific (via Hong Kong), Emirates (via Dubai) and Korean Air (via Seoul). Our consultants will be able to advise you on the most convenient and cost effective options.

Travel Within Taiwan | Most TransIndus tours are conducted by private, chauffeur driven, air-conditioned car or minivan. Your English-speaking driver will double as your guide for the duration of your trip. Taiwan has a small but efficient high-speed train network which is also occasionally used. Short domestic flights will only be necessary if you visit one of the smaller islands.

Accommodation | Taiwan boasts a number of fabulous, luxury hotels in superb locations, and if your budget permits we advise you to opt for these. A few are described in the preceding pages, but our consultants know of others and are always on the lookout for new properties to supplement our portfolio. One basic option we often recommend to clients is a night or two in the Pilgrims' Guest House at Fo Guang Shan. Equipped with en-suite rooms and air con, it's a cut above your average monastery hostel, and allows you to savour the atmosphere of the site when the crowds have all left.

Wherever you travel, English may not necessarily be spoken by all hotel staff, though rest assured your English-speaking driver-guide will be on hand to help should you require assistance with the language.



Suggested Itineraries

As with all our tailor-made trips, the itinerary sketched on this page should only be considered as a starting block, to be adapted according to your individual needs. It's common, for example, to tack two or three days of beach time on the end of an itinerary down on one of the beautiful bays around Kenting, in the tropical far south of Taiwan. Or you if feel like having

an active few days, you might want to make a detour inland to trek in one of the national parks where there are numerous multistage hikes, through fabulous scenery. The preceding pages showcase a wealth of options which, with a bit of logistical help from our expert holiday designers in London, may be incorporated into a two- or three-week trip.

Taiwan Discovered | 16 Days

A non-stop parade of awesome scenery, temples and beaches, with the metropolis of Taipei as a springboard

This 16-day trip covers most of Taiwan's scenic and cultural highlights, starting in Taipei and preceding in a clockwise direction. With a generous three nights in the capital, you'll have plenty of time to marvel at the Imperial Chinese treasures on show at the national museum, explore the city's prettiest temples and take a leisurely day trip out to nearby Chiufen and Yehliu Geo Park. From Taipei, you'll delve into the island's mountainous heart with a visit to the Taroko Gorge, before continuing on to the tropical far south, with its breezy beaches and dramatic hinterland. A night with the monks at the Fo Guang Shan monastery provides an atmospheric interlude, then it's on to experience two of Taiwan's signature landscapes at Alishan and Sun Moon Lake. The last leg of the trip takes you back to Taipei where your flight home awaits.

UK — Taipei (3 nights) — Taroko (2 nights) — Chihpen — Kenting (2 nights) — Fo Guang Shan — Tainan — Alishan — Sun Moon Lake (2 nights) — Taipei — UK





Mongolia

With its vast expanses of steppes, desert and taiga, Mongolia encompasses some of the most pristine wilderness on earth. The country boasts a population of just three million people, scattered over an area three times the size of France. And almost half live in one city: the capital, Ulaanbaatar. The rest maintain a largely nomadic existence in encampments of grey, felt yurts, or gers, where they tend horses, cattle, sheep and goats – in much the same way as their ancestors did during the age of the region’s most illustrious historic figure, Genghis Khan.

Landscapes, rather than monuments, provide the main focus for visitors here. In the north, a band of wild, pine-forested mountains and lakes line the border with Russia – the start of the great Siberian taiga – while across the south stretch the sun-scorched dunes and sand flats of the Gobi Desert. Between these two extremes lies a belt of rolling grassland, interrupted by countless hills and empty river valleys, which in the southwest rise to a range of snow-capped, glacier-encrusted summits along the Chinese border: the Altai Mountains. This thrilling scenery alone would be reason enough to visit Mongolia. But the country also preserves a unique nomadic culture. Wherever you travel, yurts sprout like exotic fungi from the great, green sea of grass, and you’ll have plenty of opportunity to stay in one, walking with local guides, or riding beautiful steppe horses.



Highlights of Mongolia

Ulaanbaatar | A modern city encircled by sprawling yurt encampments, Ulaanbaatar is a capital quite unlike any other in the world – the beating heart of modern Mongolia.

Erdene Zuu | The great Buddhist monastery of Erdene Zuu stands on the site of Mongolia’s former capital – a spectacularly exotic building surrounded by a sprawling sea of rippling, windswept grassland.

Naadam Festival | Archery, wrestling and horse racing are the sports followed most passionately in Mongolia and all three feature prominently in this annual festival, when tournaments are staged.

Camping at Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur | Sleep in a felt yurt and ride Mongolian horses on the shores of this shimmering lake in the Khangai Mountains, overlooked by an extinct volcano which you can climb.

Khustain Nuruu National Park | Watch herds of *takhi* – believed to be the last truly wild horses surviving on the great steppes – gallop wild across the Mongolian grasslands at this world-famous rescue centre.

The Gobi Desert | Explore the dramatic red dunes of the far south on a camel trek, staying at a yurt camp deep in the desert for a night or two to experience the Gobi’s wondrous starry skies.

Khovsgol Nuur | This beautiful lake in the far north of Mongolia is the place to experience quintessential taiga forest, roamed by wolves, wolverines, bears, snow leopards – and nomadic reindeer herders.

Eagle Hunters of the High Altai | The extreme southwest of Mongolia is the region where Muslim Kazakh herders still hunt with trained golden eagles – one of the most romantic spectacles Central Asia has to offer.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+7, +8 hours
Flying time: 12 hours
Currency: Mongolian togrog
Capital: Ulaanbaatar

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	-25	-21	-13	-1	11	14	17	15	8	-1	-13	-22
Rainfall mm	0	0	3	5	10	28	76	51	23	5	5	3
Best to travel	●	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●	●
	●● The best time to travel		● A good time to travel		● Low season							

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Ulaanbaatar

Mongolia's modern capital, Ulaanbaatar, started life in the 17th century as a peripatetic monastery encampment of shacks and yurts, which moved every few years to different sites around the confluence of the Tuul and Selbe Rivers. Fuelled by the so-called Kyakhta caravan trade between Russia and China, it eventually coalesced into a permanent city, expanding rapidly after Independence in 1990. Today, almost half the entire population of Mongolia lives within its confines, many of them in *gers* and little wooden shanty houses on the outskirts.

Historic monuments are thin on the ground here, though enough survive to make up a rewarding day's sightseeing. Foremost among them: the Gandan Khiid monastery, which houses a sublime 26-metre, burnished copper statue of Avalokitesvara; the Winter Palace of the Bogd Khan, a beautiful antique, Tibetan-style residence where the emperor used to pass the cold season; and the Choijin Lama Temple, former seat of the state Oracle.

For an expansive view over the capital and its wild environs, scale Zaisan Hill, on the south side of the city, where a USSR-funded war memorial surveys an impressive sweep of suburbs and steppe.



Khustain Nuruu National Park

This reserve to the southwest of Ulaanbaatar is one of only three places in the entire Mongolian steppe where you can still see pure, wild horses. The breed, known as Przewalski's horse, or *takhi* in the local language, has never been domesticated. By the mid-1960s it was on the brink of extinction, with numbers down to less than a dozen. Only thanks to a concerted rescue programme did it survive, and here at Khustain you can enjoy the heart-warming spectacle of a healthy herd roaming free against a backdrop of wild, rock-studded grassland.

To ensure the best chances of a sighting, we recommend you spend a night at the *ger* camp near the park, which will allow you to be in situ at dawn and dusk, when the *takhis* congregate at favourite spots such as stream banks. The reserve holds around 200 horses – a herd of 40 bachelor stallions, and the rest in family groups of females (known as 'harems') accompanied by one dominant male. During the migration seasons in the early spring and autumn, the area is also a great one for spotting birds.



Khorgo Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur National Park

Deep in the heart of the Khangai Mountains lies this exquisitely beautiful freshwater lake, formed millions of years ago when lava flows blocked the Suman River, a tributary of the Chuluut. The best views over Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur (literally 'Great White Lake') and its epic hinterland are to be had from the rim of an extinct volcanic crater at the eastern end of the lake – the Khorgo. Yurt camps strung along the northern shore provide idyllic bases from which to ride on horseback into the surrounding grassland.



Kharkhorin & the Orkhon Valley

The dramatic Orkhon Valley in central Mongolia, where the foothills of the Khangai Mountains peter into the steppes, served as the site of the Mongol capital before it moved to Peking in 1264. Dressed stone from the site was later used to construct a splendid Tibetan-style monastery, Erdene Zuu, which still stands, having been restored since its destruction in 1939 by the Communist regime. Only a few of the 64 original shrines survive, along with the massive, stupa-studded perimeter wall, but it's still a wonderfully romantic spot.

Naadam Festival

In July, a mini Olympics of traditional steppe sports are staged in towns and cities across Mongolia. The full title of the festival is 'Eriin Gurvan Naadam' – or 'Naadam' for short – literally 'Three Games of Men'. The trio of events referred to are always the same: archery, wrestling and horse racing. For the archery, full-length silk *deel* are worn. The wrestlers don skintight shorts and odd-looking pairs of chestless sleeves joined at the back. And traditional garb also features in the horse racing, in which most of the jockeys are young boys. They practise for months ahead of race days, when literally hundreds of animals compete in a single, chaotic dash over a distance of a couple of miles.





Northern Mongolia

The far north of the country, towards the Russian border, comprises a vast tract of wild mountains and taiga stretching to Lake Baikal in Siberia. Winter temperatures can be ferocious, -50°C or lower, but in summer, the grasslands and larch forests of the Sayan range attract a steady flow of visitors, who come to camp, fish for salmon and sturgeon, and ride horses around the shores of Khovsgol Nuur. Over 85 miles (135km) long and 260 metres deep, this extraordinary lake is among the largest bodies of freshwater in the world and forms the focal point of a magnificent national park where ibex, elk, wolf, wolverine, bears and sable are all protected.

The region can be reached overland – an 18-hour slog over gravel and dirt tracks – or by plane via the town of Moron, a couple of hours from the lake. Either way, count on the adventure of a lifetime. When travelling overland, in order to break the long journey north into manageable stages we generally recommend a night at the ger camp located near Amarbayasgalant Khiid, one of the country's three principal Buddhist centres. The monastery was created in the mid-18th century at the spot in the Iven Valley where the famous Mongolian monk and artist, Zanabazar, passed away in 1723. It numbers among the few antique religious buildings to have escaped complete destruction during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s; more than twenty of the original shrines survive, and the main prayer hall has been extensively restored with the help of UNESCO. Today, the red-walled complex forms an arresting spectacle amid the sea of undulating green grasslands and ridges surrounding it. For the best panoramas, hike to the hilltop immediately behind the monastery in the early morning, taking with you a blue scarf to add to the shrine of the Mountain God on the summit.



The Tsaatan

To the west of Khovsgol Nuur, the empty Darkhad Depression is the homeland of Mongolia's last reindeer herders, the Tsaatan: 44 families still live in the traditional nomadic way around this pine-speckled plain, moving five or six times each year between camps at different altitudes. They inhabit conical, tepee-style tents called ortz, which are made from birch bark, animal hides, bones and wood. The summer months see the Tsaatan widely scattered over the higher ground of the Sayan mountains, but in summer they congregate around the shores of Khovsgol Nuur, which freezes solid.

While staying in the area, it is possible to arrange to visit the Tsaatan at their summer camps, where their livestock graze on lush pasture in the mountains before returning to the taiga forest in winter – a way of life nowadays threatened by climate change and the spread of gold mining in this remote borderland.





The Wild, Wild West: Bayan-Olgii

Sandwiched between Siberia and China's Xinjiang Province, the southwest of Mongolia, known as Bayan-Olgii, comprises a far-flung tract of mountains and empty grassland. This is about as wild and remote as Asia gets: the landscape is spectacularly rugged, the climate unforgiving and infrastructure virtually non-existent. Livestock outnumbers people by a factor of 150 and paved roads tend to peter out after a couple of miles.

Unlike the rest of the Mongolian population, most of the locals in Bayan-Olgii are Kazakh-speaking Muslims. One third live in a single town, Olgii, which is connected by regular flights to Ulaanbaatar. Aside from the chance to see Eagle Hunters in action (see box), the main reason to venture out here is to experience the natural wonders of the Altai Tavan Bogd National Park, which include Mongolia's highest mountain (Khuiten Peak, 4,374m/14,350ft), whose sides are sculpted by the awesome Potanin Glacier. The park's White River valley also boasts one of Asia's most impressive collection of prehistoric petroglyphs, depicting hunting and warfare scenes from 11,000–6,000 BC. Camp in fabulously wild, snow-capped mountains with nomadic yurt dwellers. Climb some of the most remote peaks in the world, trekking for days without crossing a road. The extreme remoteness of Mongolia's southwest make it a top destination for anyone wishing to experience true wilderness.



Meeting the Eagle Hunters

Dressed in a full-length Kazakh coat, fur trimmed hat, and boots, a horseman rides across the frosted lower slopes of Mongolia's Altai mountains. A light covering of snow dusts the surrounding peaks. He squints, scouring the hillsides for movement. On his wrist, a beautiful Golden Eagle waits patiently to be released into the sky, eager for a chance to catch one of the black foxes that have been picking off lambs from the family's flocks.

Kazakh herders of the high Altai region in southwest Mongolia have practised this extraordinary form of hunting for hundreds, possibly thousands of years. Capturing female eaglets from nests on inaccessible cliff ledges in the mountains, they train birds to kill predators, typically keeping them for seven or eight years before releasing them back into the wild.

Known as 'Berkutchi', the Eagle Hunters tend only to fly their birds in winter, but visitors can watch displays of their skills in the autumn, when a couple of festivals attract as many as 70 birds and their owners from the valleys around Olgii. For the more committed, homestays with local *berkutchi* families may also be arranged, when you'll get to see hunters of various ages train and care for their birds. To experience a bona fide hunt, however, you'll have to brave the fierce cold of the Altai winter, when the fox-hunting season proper gets underway.





Southern Mongolia: the Gobi Desert

A vast rain shadow formed by the blocking of clouds by the Himalayan range, the Gobi dominates the southern half of Mongolia. Freezing in winter and blisteringly hot in summer, this is an inhospitable landscape of sun-scorched plains, huge dunes of shifting sand and rocky canyons backed by ranges of rippling red mountains – one of the last and greatest wilderness areas on the planet.

The Mongolian desert has long been a source of fascination for visitors, and no trip to the country is complete without a foray south into the sand flats. Landforms such as the ice-carpeted Valley of Vultures ('Yolyn Am')

and 'Flaming Cliffs' of Bayanzag provide targets for day trips in Four-Wheel Drives. You'll spend the nights in remote *ger* camps, where the purple-pink light at sunrise is sublime, and night skies truly wondrous.

The ultimate location for admiring the transformative effect of the desert light is the Duut Mankhan, popularly known as the 'Khongoryn Els' – a tract of other-worldly, 300-metre-high dunes in the lap of the Altai Mountains. Exploring this spectacular landscape on the back of a Bactrian camel, you may, on windy days, hear the eerie whine of slipping silica that has earned the *els* the apt name 'Singing Sands'.

Exploring Mongolia

Once outside its capital, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia is all about wilderness. Towns are few and far between. Most of the population is semi-nomadic, living in seasonal encampments with their livestock out on the grasslands, taiga, lakeshores and desert fringes. You'll have ample opportunity to experience their way of life when you stay in the *ger* camps that spring up in the summer months to cater for visitors. Providing simple comforts in striking locations, these serve as stepping stones on journeys across this vast, sparsely populated country. Distances between them vary, as do road conditions, and to reach the more far-flung regions you should expect some long, bumpy journeys. Mongolia is the kind of place where travel is truly an adventure.

When to Go | The peak tourist season in Mongolia is short, lasting from June until mid-August. Thereafter, thunderstorms become more frequent and temperatures begin to drop. September sees more changeable weather and by October the snowline starts to creep inexorably downwards, engulfing the entire country from late December until the spring. In the depths of winter, travel is rendered all but impossible by freezing conditions, heavy snow and the total absence of accommodation outside the main towns and cities.

International Flights | There are no direct flights to Ulaanbaatar from the UK. Journeys normally involve one or two changes of plane – one in a European hub, and another in the Far East – Beijing, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Seoul being the most common stopovers. Whichever route you opt for, total travel time will be 18–24hrs. Korean Air and Air China are our preferred carriers, offering the most streamlined routes and competitive fares.

Travel Within Mongolia | Most travel in Mongolia is conducted by private car with a driver and English-speaking guide who will accompany you for the duration of your trip. We only use comfortable, high-quality vehicles suitable for your planned itinerary. Domestic flights are rarely used, unless you wish to visit the Altai Mountains in the far west of the country.

Accommodation | While the choice of four- and five-star hotels is good in the capital, you'll spend most of the rest of your journey sleeping in traditional felt or canvas *gers*. During the summer, special camps are erected for visitors, where you'll be able to go for treks and horse rides, and visit local nomads. The *gers* themselves are very comfortable, with proper beds and wood burning stoves, and are beautifully furnished and decorated in traditional style. Hot showers will also be available. We choose our camps carefully, taking into account the quality of the yurts, standards of service, location and overall atmosphere.



Suggested Itineraries

Mongolia is simply too vast to cover in a single two- or three-week trip. Instead, we recommend clients focus on one or two regions that offer a cross-section of what the country has to offer. This 14-night tour does just that, travelling to Lake Khovsgol in the far north via a chain of wonderfully

remote, atmospheric locations where you'll get a full sense of Mongolia's varied geography and cultural riches. With an extra week, you could also make detours south into the shifting dunes of the Gobi Desert, or venture to the Altai Mountains in the far west to spend time with Kazakh eagle hunters.

Northern Exposure | 15 Days

An epic journey pausing at lakes, monasteries and reindeer herders' ger camps in the far north

Travel to one of the last truly wild corners of the planet on this two-week tour covering the highlights of north and central Mongolia. Your trip starts with three days exploring the capital's monasteries and museums, with a foray out to the colossal Genghis Khan statue, before commencing your journey across the grasslands. First halt is at one of the country's most important, remote and beautiful Buddhist monasteries, where you'll spend your first night in a Mongolian *ger*. Yurt camps, located near hilltop shrines, waterfalls and hot springs, provide bases for the remainder of the tour as you travel to and from Lake Khovsgol, where you'll have a rare opportunity to visit an encampment of Tsaatan reindeer herders – an experience of a lifetime. Horse lovers will also enjoy a visit to the delightful Khustain Nuruu sanctuary where some of world's last pure wild horses survive. After a final night back in Ulaanbaatar, you catch your return flight to the UK.

UK — Ulaanbaatar (3 nights) — Amarbayasgalant Khiid — Bulgan — Lake Khovsgol (2 nights) — Tsenkher Hot Springs — Orkhon Valley — Tuvkhun Khiid — Ugii Lake — Khustain Nuruu National Park — Ulaanbaatar — UK





Trading Treasures: The Ancient Silk Road

Before the opening of the sea route around the Horn of Africa in the 16th century, the principal way valuable merchandise travelled between China, India and Europe was overland, via the vast deserts and mountain ranges of Central Asia. Silk, a fibre whose origins were kept a closely guarded secret for thousands of years by the Chinese, formed the mainstay of this ancient trade, which is why the tangle of tracks along which it travelled came to be known as the 'Silk Route'.

Writers from Goethe to Keats were fascinated by the near mythic cities that punctuated the trade arteries: Yarkhand, Kashgar, Bishkek, Khiva, Samarkand and Bukhara . . . Their very names evoke images of great caravans of twin-humped Bactrian camels marching across vast, undulating steppes, of turquoise-tiled minarets and onion domes rising against chimeric mountain backdrops, and of fabulous bazaars, where merchants traded bolts of shimmering brocade, gold, silver, ivory and Mediterranean coloured glass for Chinese porcelain, paper, tea, perfumes and medicinal herbs.

With foreigners forbidden under pain of death to set foot in many of these far-flung capitals, most of what was known about them was, in effect, Chinese whispers, until the Great Game of the 19th century, when they became pieces in a vast geopolitical chessboard.

Since the break-up of the USSR, however, the dusty heart of Central Asia has never been more readily accessible. Many of the great monuments have received spectacular facelifts, and there are plenty of comfortable hotels to stay in while you explore them.

Travelling overland, and by plane, TransIndus Silk Route tours offer the chance to see the pick of the architectural treasures along the historic trade artery; from Beijing, the Caves of Mogao, markets of Kashgar (covered in our China section) to the architectural masterpieces of Samarkand and Bukhara. You'll also get to cross the legendary Tianshan mountains, ride horses over the open steppes, and spend a night in a felt yurt (*ger*) with Kyrgyz nomads - all unforgettable experiences on one of the world's greatest journeys.





Central Asia

Encompassing some of the least explored mountain and desert regions on the planet, the former-Soviet states of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (collectively known, for obvious reasons, as 'the Stans') - have emerged from the shadow of Communist rule to assert their own vibrant and distinct identities.

The mighty Tianshan range sprawls over 80% of Kyrgyzstan, where nomadism and dramatic wilderness combine to unique effect. In the course of a typical two-week tour you'll sleep in yurt encampments in the middle of nowhere, dine on mare's yoghurt along the shores of shimmering glacial lakes and watch sunsets over grasslands unchanged in thousands of years. Elsewhere in the region, the focus is primarily cultural: a string of splendid oasis cities retaining some of the most sublime monuments ever created by the Islamic world. The turquoise-mosaic and gilded domes of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva, and the eroded remains of Merv and Konye-Urgench, spring from the surrounding sand flats like hallucinations - a vivid testament to the power of the dynasties who dominated trade along the Oxus to the Caspian Sea.



Highlights of Central Asia

Issyk Kul, Kyrgyzstan | Swim from wild beaches in a vast, saline inland sea, encircled by snow-streaked ranges and grasslands dotted with the summer camps of Kyrgyz nomads.

Bukhara, Uzbekistan | Five-thousand years of history are encompassed by the monuments of Bukhara, the most secretive of the caravan cities on the Silk Road, and the cultural heart of Central Asia.

Torugart Pass, Kyrgyzstan | Culminating point on the epic road journey from China, Torugart provides the only motorable route over the Tianshan - one of the world's great road trips.

Karakalpak Museum of Arts, Uzbekistan | Nukus, in the Kyzylkum desert, holds one of the world's greatest collections of modern art, amassed in the 1950s and 1960s by an eccentric Russian émigré.

'Heli Trek' to Inylchek | An ex-Russian military helicopter flies weekly to the base camp of Pobeda (7,439m) and Khan Tengri (7,010m) peaks, depositing you in a land of rock and ice.

Pamir Highway, Tajikistan | Travel through the heart of the snow-topped Pamirs from Khorog to Osh, crossing one of the world's great unspoilt wilderness areas - a road trip of the highest calibre.

Samarkand, Uzbekistan | The great Mongol warlord Timur, aka 'Tamerlane', made Samarkand his capital in 1370 - and the buildings his successors erected still rank among the finest in the Islamic world.

Ashgabat, Turkmenistan | Marvel at the white marble monoliths and gilded domes erected by the Turkmeni dictator, Niyazov at the end of the 20th century - a striking affirmation of the country's independence.

Travel Information

Time zone: UTC+5, +6 hours

Flying time: 7-11 hours

Currency: Uzbek, Kyrgyz som

Capital: Uz-Tashkent, Kg-Bishkek

When to go

Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Temperature °C	-3	4	8	13	19	24	26	24	19	12	7	3
Rainfall mm	53	28	66	58	36	13	5	3	3	31	38	41
Best to travel	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●	●●

●● The best time to travel ● A good time to travel ● Low season

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Web: www.transindus.com



Uzbekistan

If any monuments could be said to epitomize the distant splendour of the Silk Road, it's the domed mosques, tombs and madrasas of Uzbekistan. An ancient cultural crucible between the Amu (Oxus) and Syr Rivers, this former Soviet republic holds three of the world's oldest cities – Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva – whose walled centres are best described as ‘open-air museums’, with sights spanning five millennia.

Few visitors venture further than the region's major hubs, but there is ample incentive to do so. The silk workshops of the fabled Fergana Valley, the forgotten fortresses of the Khorezm Delta region, and nomadic camel herders camps on the fringes of the mighty Kyzylkum Desert provide vivid experiences of ways of life buried for decades under the mantle of Soviet rule.



Bukhara

The chimeric monuments of Bukhara were mostly erected by the descendent of Timur, and by the Uzbek Shaybanid dynasty who succeeded them in the 16th century. In recent years, a huge amount of work has been carried out by the Uzbek government to restore its greatest landmarks to their former glory, and although the sprawling Poi-i-Kalyan complex, Laub-i-Hauz ensemble and other sites in the centre look a touch too clean these days, they still ooze grandeur and mysticism.

In the northwest of the old walled city, the Ark is a vast palace-fortress associated with the darker side of the regimes who ruled the city from the 5th century AD until the flight of the last Emir in 1920. Among the unfortunate souls who met untimely deaths at the Ark were the British emissaries, Stoddart and Conolly, beheaded in 1842 by the Emir Nasrullah Khan for allegedly being British spies.



Samarkand

Thousands of captured artisans from Persia, Iraq and Azerbaijan were put to work by Timur to create his imperial capital, Samarkand. Encircled by snow-lit mountains, the exquisitely symmetrical domes and minarets at its heart became the marvel of the ancient Silk Road. And although it's these days hemmed in by bleak Soviet-style conurbation, the city still has about it an aura of near mythic remoteness.

Foremost among the surviving monuments here is the Registan, a grand square flanked by madrasas whose domes and walls are encrusted with azure, turquoise and wax-yellow tiles. Nearby, the resplendent Bibi-Khanym mosque has a brilliance compared by poets over the centuries with that of the Milky Way.

Narrow alleyways lined with mud-walled courtyard houses make up most of Samarkand's Old Town, where you can soak up the traditional sights and sounds of the street markets and bakeries.



Shakhrisabz

One of Central Asia's most ancient cities, this oasis 50 miles (80km) south of Samarkand, on the far side of the Gissar Mountains, was where Alexander the Great met his wife, Roxana, in the 4th century BC. It is better known, however, as the birthplace of Timur – a fact celebrated by a crop of wonderful 14th- and 15th-century monuments.

The real show stealer here is the majestic Kok Gumbaz mosque, with its three vibrant turquoise domes. The remnants of Timur's own Summer Palace, the Ak-Sarai, come a close second: sublime blue, white and gold mosaics embellish the surviving gateway of the building.

Craft traditions dating from the time of Timur still thrive in Shakhrisabz, and no visit to the town is complete without a stop at the famous Khudjum Embroidery factory, where a legion of 1,600 workers weave carpets, mats, traditional Uzbek silk gowns and distinctive, multi-coloured local skullcaps. The factory was set up in 1928 as an all-women co-operative.



Into the Kyzylkum

Straddling the borders of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the formidable Kyzylkum (literally 'Red Sand') forms a vast area of parched dunes (here known as 'barchans') and baked clay flats. Visitors may sample its distinctive atmosphere on short camel treks around the shores of Aydar Kul Lake, a 160-mile-long (250-km) body of brackish water that was formed following a botched dam project during the Soviet era. Based in a traditional Kazakh yurt camp, you can venture across the sands to the lakeshore, feasting on freshly baked bread dipped in camel's milk for lunch, and bedding down under rainbow-coloured quilts at night. Wildlife is sparse, but you may be lucky enough to spot one of the rare monitor lizards that inhabit the region, and which grow to over 5 feet in length! Herds of wild Przewalski's horses may also occasionally be sighted when exploring the desert on camel back.

Nurata

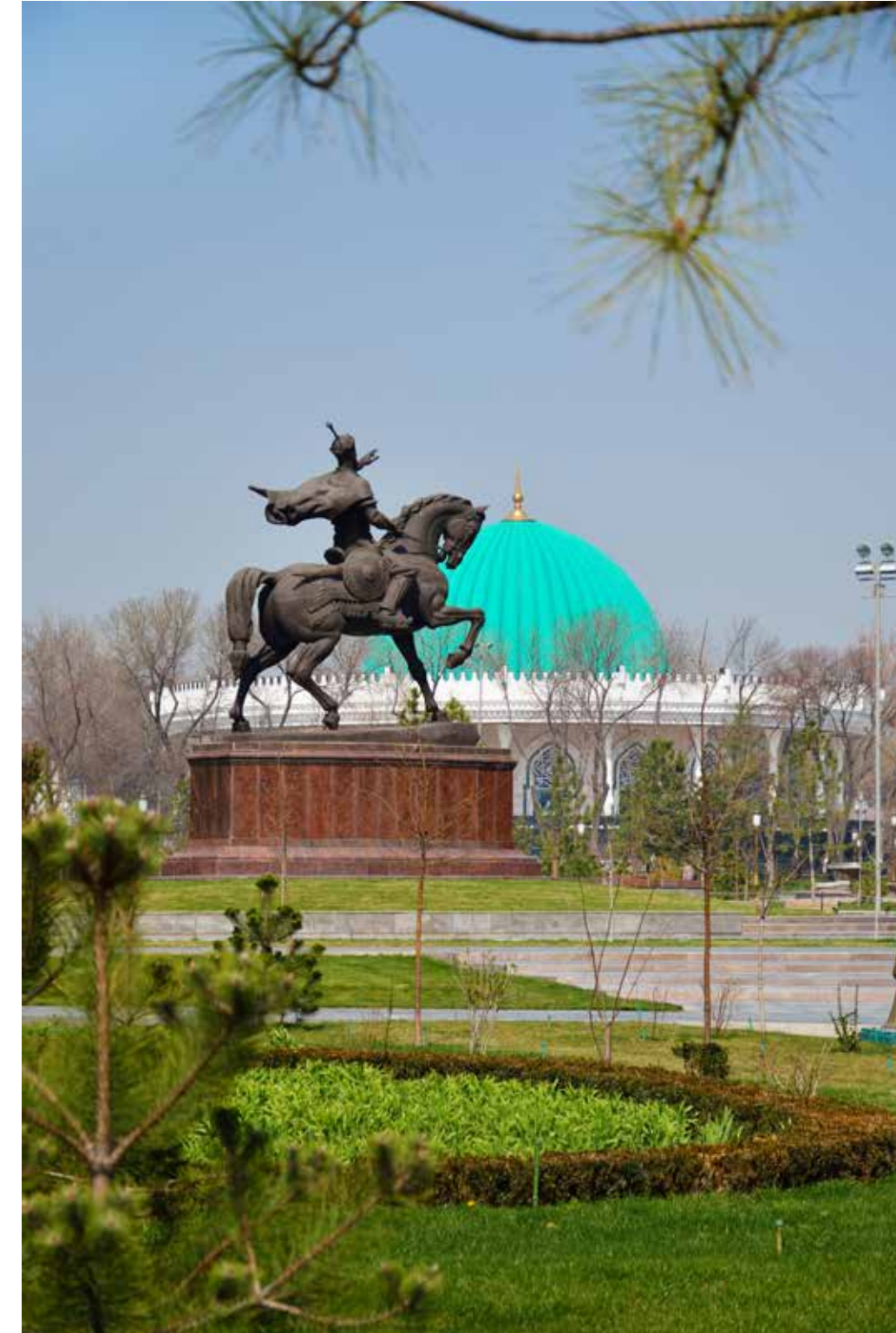
The most important town in the Kyzylkum, Nurata, was founded by Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC (the remains of the fortress he built can, amazingly, still be seen on the south side of town). Long an important caravanserai on the road between Samarkand and Bukhara, it is centered on a spring-fed oasis, the Chashma, said to have been created by the brother of the Prophet Mohammed. Dating from between the 9th and 15th centuries, a complex of beautiful domed mosques, wells and bathhouses nowadays attract Shia pilgrims from across the region – an exotic spectacle against the backdrop of desert mountains to the south.



Sentab & the Nurata Nature Reserve

To the north of Samarkand rise the rocky Nurata Mountains – an imposing granite barrier separating the fertile belt of central Uzbekistan from the sands of the Kyzylkum beyond. The majority of locals in this region are Tajik camel herders and farmers. A wonderful way to experience their way of life is with a village stay at Sentab, a postcard-pretty settlement swathed in walnut trees and fruit orchards where you can sleep in a traditional flat-roofed, drystone farmstead, helping with the daily chores, from baking bread to herding the sheep.

An extensive network of homestays enables visitors to trek between different valleys and experience the unspoiled grandeur of this little frequented enclave – community-based tourism at its best. Possible day trips include explorations of prehistoric petroglyph sites and forays into the 160-sq-km Nurata Nature Reserve, famous as a stronghold of the rare Severtzov's wild sheep.



Tashkent

For the majority of visitors, the Uzbek capital serves primarily as a gateway hub, where you can recover from your jet lag in a modern, comfortable hotel and acclimatize with short excursions around the city. Time permitting, we recommend clients sample the Central Asian atmosphere of the Chorsu Bazaar, up in the old quarter, whose spice, fresh produce and traditional clothes markets offer some fine photo opportunities. Nearby, the beautiful Khast Imam Mosque is also worth a visit to see the famous Uthman Quran, which was written in Kufic script in the 8th or early 9th century, and is believed to be one of the oldest surviving Korans in the world. Anyone interested in local art should also slot in a tour of the Abdul Khasim Madrasa, a grand 19th-century former Islamic school now used as a centre for traditional crafts, where you can watch ceramicists, painters of miniatures, weavers, metalworkers and embroiderers in action.

For lunch, your TransIndus guide will be delighted to take you to the famous National Food restaurant – the best and most authentic place to eat in Tashkent. Specialities include traditional Uzbek delights such as *plov* (a regional take on pulao made with sizzling lamb, rice and apricots), melt-in-the-mouth shashlik kebabs and, best of all, *halim*, a hearty, slow-cooked meat stew mopped up with freshly baked flatbread.



Margilan & the Fergana Valley

It is on the face of it, ironic, given the region's trade history, that the one commodity in conspicuously short supply in Central Asia these days is silk. Only a handful of places still manufacture the fabric in the traditional way – the most famous of them in the Fergana Valley, a vast, fertile basin surrounded by snow peaks a day's drive southeast of Tashkent across the Tianshan range.

In the Fergana town of Margilan, the Yodgorlik Silk Factory offers a unique opportunity to witness the colourful process of sericulture in action – from the steaming of cocoons to unravelling the fibre, to the dyeing and weaving of exquisite Khan-Atlas (long silk coats). Traditional Uzbek garb is also much in evidence amid the stalls of Kumtepa Bazaar, on the outskirts of town, where every Thursday and Sunday local people dressed in full finery buy and sell fresh produce and livestock.





Khiva

In the early 19th century, the name 'Khiva' struck fear into the hearts of Western explorers. The capital of a famously sadistic despots known as the 'Khans' (direct descendants of the redoubtable Genghis Khan), it served as the final staging post for caravans bound across the desert to Iran. Today, the town occupies an incongruous bulge in the border with Turkmenistan, in Uzbekistan's far west, but is easily accessible by road via the city of Urgench.

Evidence of Khiva's former prominence is an exceptional ensemble of monuments, whose jade-green and blue-glazed domes soar above a belt of medieval mud walls. Most have been immaculately restored, yet they attract far less attention than those of either Samarkand or Bukhara.

The defining landmark here is the Kalta Minar, a squat, elaborately tiled minaret which was never completed because the Khan who commissioned it died before work on the top section could be finished. Like most of the town's major sights, it dates from the 19th century, although vestiges of much older civilizations punctuate the winding streets of Itchan Kala, the inner walled city. An example is the Djuma Mosque, whose brick domes are supported by pillars that were originally carved from black elm and apricot wood more than a thousand years ago, when Zoroastrianism still held sway in the region.



The Khorezm Desert Forts

More than two millennia ago, a sophisticated irrigation system channelled meltwater from the Pamirs into the Amu Darya (Oxus) Delta, a region known as the Khorezm, transforming the desert into a fertile oasis of lakes, reed beds, marshes and lush farmland. The lynchpins of this long lost civilization were a chain of mud-walled citadels, whose remains now rise from low sand hills, an hour's drive north of Urgench. Almost entirely forgotten but spellbindingly beautiful, two of the most spectacular are Toprak Kala and Ayaz Kala. Both may be visited on day trips from Khiva, or explored at greater leisure by staying in a nomads' yurt camp nearby - worth a night under camel hide to see the fabulously starry skies of the Kyzylkum at night, and the spectacle of the forts glowing red in the dawn sunshine.



Timurid Tiles

Of all the art forms refined under the patronage of the Timurids, glazed tilework has achieved the most enduring and visible legacy in Uzbekistan. Every inch of the minarets, domes, niches and facades embellishing the country's world-famous religious monuments are encrusted with intricate ceramics, whose vivid blue and green hues form a sublime contrast with the mud-brick houses of the surrounding streets.

The tilework of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva represents the high-watermark of a tradition with roots dating back several thousand years. Examples of glazed mosaics have been unearthed in the ruins of ancient Babylon and Egypt, and all across pre-Muslim Persia. The form, however, achieved new levels of sophistication under the influence of Islam.

The Seljuk Dynasty - who ruled a great swath of West and Central Asia between the 10th and 12th centuries - are generally credited with the innovation that made it possible to produce the most complex designs. By adding quartz, clay and various metal oxides to the slip, and mixing the ashes of certain desert plants as a flux before firing, Seljuk glazes would vitrify at more manageable temperatures, thereby creating more vibrant,

and durable hues. This lead-free technique (later known as a 'faience' in Europe), in turn gave rise to the so-called 'haft rangi' (seven colours) form, where individual pieces would be cut and fired separately before being assembled into panels.

The result was an explosion of intricacy and colour across the Islamic world. Bands of fine Kufic and Thuluth calligraphy now accompanied ornate geometric designs, whose finesse reflected the advances in mathematics and astrology being made in the Arab courts.

Skilled ceramicists were brought back to the Timurid cities as captives from Persia to work on the buildings erected by Timur and his descendants. The slaves, however, kept their knowledge a closely-guarded secret: recipes for glaze were rarely committed to paper, being handed on orally from father to son. Only by deploying modern chemistry were UNESCO-funded experts, working five or more centuries later, able to unlock the mysteries of Timurid tilework and restore the great mosaics. Even so, the modern additions already appear as pale imitations of their medieval forerunners.



Kyrgyzstan

Few people could tell you much about this former Soviet republic in Central Asia, but Kyrgyzstan is, quite simply, among the most beautiful places on the planet. Bisected by the Tianshan, or 'Celestial Mountains', it forms a rugged buffer between the great Eurasian Steppe to the north and deserts of Chinese Xinjiang to the south. Around 90% of the country lies above 1,500m, and more than a third of it is permanently snow covered. From the foot of its ice-encrusted summits roll pristine forests of fir and spruce, wind-eroded canyons, and expansive grasslands cradling vivid blue lakes.

For thousands of years, these contrasting landscapes supported populations of semi-nomadic herders, who grazed their goats, sheep, horses and yaks at altitude during the summer months, sleeping in felt yurts and migrating back down the valleys in winter. Decades of Stalinist rule left this age-old way of life in sharp decline, but pockets have endured, and today these form the basis of a unique travel experience.

Unlike neighbouring Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan is not somewhere to come for monuments or remnants of elite culture. But for anyone wanting to gain a sense of what life on the old Silk Road may have been like between the great bazaars of Bukhara and Samarkand; the yurt camps, astounding scenery and welcoming people of this surprisingly little visited country will provide plenty of inspiration. Whether a memorable interlude in long overland journeys through the Stans, or as a stand-alone destination in its own right, Kyrgyzstan is a country ripe for exploration.



Bishkek

A city of wide, tree-lined boulevards and marble-fronted municipal buildings, Bishkek retains the feel of a Soviet-block capital circa 1990, though it makes an engaging place to find one's feet before heading into the nearby mountains. Top of your 'to-see' list should be the massive Ala-Too (formerly 'Lenin') Square, where a changing of the guard ceremony takes place daily, followed by a tour of sprawling Osh Bazaar, Bishkek's main market - don't miss the spice and nut section, or the tailor's wing across the road at Kyyal Bazaar, where lines of small shops sell traditional Kyrgyz felt hats, horse tack and yurt paraphernalia.



Song Kol

This high-altitude lake in central Kyrgyzstan is one of our very favourite destinations in the region - a spot that has everything you come to this part of the world to see, in abundance. Framed by a backdrop of snow peaks, its turquoise waters are enfolded by expanses of rolling grassland used as 'jailoo' (pastures) in the summer months by local nomads. A few families have set up traditional yurt camps here for visitors, which enables you to experience the unique atmosphere of the lake at different times of day, and in changing light. Herds of beautiful horses and shaggy yaks dot the shoreline, against an exotic spread of ice-flecked peaks.



The Ala Archa Valley

It's astonishing that such a wild space as this spectacular valley in the Ala-Too range can exist so close to a city the size of Bishkek, less than an hour's drive away. And although the national park is popular with middle-class picnickers on weekends, few of its mountain trails see much traffic. Ranging from grassy, flower-filled meadows to snow-covered crags approaching 5,000m, the alpine scenery is also wonderfully unsullied by ski stations and other human encroachments, making the perfect backdrop for hikes of various grades, as well as hacks on horseback.

The 'archa' of the valley's name refers to a species of juniper that grows in profusion hereabouts, and which local people believe keeps evil spirits at bay when burned as incense - a practise common across the Central Asian steppes and neighbouring Tibet.

Balasağun & the Burana Tower

Rising from a grassy plain against a backdrop of windswept ice peaks, the Burana Tower in the Chuy Valley forms a superbly iconic spectacle. The remains of a minaret that once stood 45m (145ft) tall, it is virtually the sole surviving vestige of the ancient Soghdian city of Balasağun, once an important stop on the Silk Road. Dotted around a field next to the tower is a collection of enigmatic stone grave markers. Carved into human forms, with faces and weapons clearly discernible, the figures appear to be buried waist or neck deep, as if emerging from the earth. They're believed to be around 1,500 years old.



Issyk Kul

Dominating the east of Kyrgyzstan is chimeric Issyk Kul Lake. Around 113 miles (182km) in length, it's the second largest mountain lake in the world after Titicaca, and one of Central Asia's most spellbinding sights. In fine weather, the surrounding curtain of snow-capped mountains is reflected to magical effect in Issyk Kul's glassy water, which despite its proximity to the Tianshan range, never freezes, even in the depths of winter. In wilder weather, surprisingly large waves can form, making the lake feel like an inland sea.

It's possible to complete a circuit of Issyk Kul by car. We particularly love the section of road skirting the southern shore, which affords superb views of the Tianshan peaks and passes a spot where you can watch local Kyrgyz men hunt with trained eagles. Side routes peel away to various other wonders including the Skazka 'Fairy Tale' Canyon, where outcrops of red and ochre-tinged sandstone have been worn into phantasmagorical shapes.



Karakol

At the eastern end of Issyk Kul, Karakol was created at the end of the 19th century as a Russian military garrison town, and is today the region's main hub. A sleepy grid of down-at-heel wooden houses, the place springs to life on Sundays when nomads from the surrounding valleys descend to buy and sell animals at the weekly livestock market - a great photo opportunity. While in the area, be sure to seek out the delightful gingerbread-style Russian Orthodox church, rebuilt in the 1980s.



Trekking & Horse Riding Kyrgyzstan

For the most vivid experience of Kyrgyzstan's dramatic mountain landscapes, it pays to venture away from road level and up to the remote 'jailoos' where the region's nomads look after their flocks and herds during the summer months. Our trips offer plenty of scope for off-track exploration, whether on foot or horseback, with routes ranging from easy half-day ambles along crystalline rivers and forest trails, to more challenging multistage adventures that crest high passes.

Hikes | A two-day trek that's highly recommended for its postcard-pretty alpine scenery is the Altyn-Arashan route, around the parallel valleys of the Terskey Alatau range to the south of Karakol and Issyk Kul Lake. Highlight of the walk include a panoramic view of exquisite Ala Kol, a brilliant turquoise-coloured glacial lake encircled by snow peaks, which you skirt during the ascent up a 3,800-metre (12,467-ft) pass. After a sharp descent in the afternoon, the night is spent in a traditional *boyuz* (yurt) camp at the head of remote valley.

Confirmed trekkers with experience of multistage expeditions should give serious consideration to the most spectacular of all the mountain routes in this region, the week-long haul to the mighty Inylchek Glacier. Winding

for 39 miles (62km) through the heart of the central Tianshan range, the great ice river is among the longest in Central Asia, and flanked by some highest and most majestic peaks in this part of the world, including Khan Tengri (7,010m/22,998ft) and Pobeda (7,439m/24,406ft). From South Inylchek Base Camp, you can fly back to road level in an ex-military Russian helicopter - an unforgettable experience affording matchless views of the Tianshan.

Horse Treks | Another experience not to be missed is a horse trek through the Kyrgyz mountains. Taking you deep into sublime Central Asian wilderness areas, with landscapes spanning sun-bleached semi-desert to rolling steppe and snow-dusted passes, the route we generally recommend - both for experienced riders and newbies - is a two-day trek from Kyzart, in the hills south of Bishkek. You spend the first night at altitude in a yurt, before crossing a 3,700-metre (12,139-ft) pass to begin a descent to beautiful Song Kol lake.

For more details on these, and other outdoor adventures in Kyrgyzstan, contact one of our Central Asia specialists at the Old Fire Station in Ealing.



Jety Orguz Gorge & Valley of Flowers

Karakol serves as a jumping-off place for one of Kyrgyzstan's most distinctive landforms, the blood-red crags of the Jety Orguz Gorge. The most photographed formations in the valley are the so-called 'Seven Bulls', a row of spectacular crags set against a glorious backdrop of alpine meadows and snow-streaked mountains.

We recommend clients continue up the un-surfaced road beyond the rocks to spend a night in a family-owned yurt camp, set in the bucolic surroundings of the 'Valley of Flowers', which as its name suggests is ablaze with wild blooms in the spring.

Torugart Pass

In the annals of Central Asian travel, the bleak, windswept, snow-prone Torugart Pass looms large. Forming one of only two crossing points in the Tianshan range between Kyrgyzstan and the Chinese province of Xinjiang, it stands as a gateway to Kashgar and the sand flats of the mighty Taklamakan Desert. Although easily bypassed by plane, we thoroughly recommend undertaking the overland trip, which is among the most compelling in all of Asia. Road surface conditions can be poor at the pass itself, and the bureaucracy involved in the crossing sometimes problematic, but TransIndus have decades of experience facilitating this famous journey. We can arrange top-grade four-wheel drive vehicles and our staff in-country will ensure the necessary paperwork is in place well in advance, so that you can sit back and enjoy the extraordinary scenery.



Tash Rabat

If any sight in Kyrgyzstan could be said to encapsulate the atmosphere of the ancient Silk Road, it's this mysterious monument in the lap of the Tianshan mountains. Enfolded by denuded, snow-streaked hillsides, the building was originally constructed as a Nestorian-Christian monastery in the 10th century, and later converted for use as a caravanserai, complete with 31 domed rooms and central courtyard. Spend a couple of nights at the adjacent yurt camp, run by the welcoming Nazira and her family, for a vivid experience of this wonderfully remote spot.

Horses are available locally for hacks through nearby valleys, and longer, multistage rides are also an option for those with sufficient time. One of the most inspiring destinations (also reachable on foot) is remote Chatyr Kul, an exquisite turquoise glacial lake enfolded by high mountains.



Felt Makers

The collectivization policies of the Soviet era had a devastating impact on the Kyrgyz way of life. Some aspects of the old culture, however, are enjoying a renaissance thanks to tourism - among them the art of felt making, which has revived since the country opened its doors to visitors in the 1990s.

The raw material for Kyrgyz felt is ultra-warm wool from locally reared Merino and Karakol sheep, which is picked clean, washed, soaked in soda ash, dyed, fixed, dried and rolled - all by hand, and by women, mostly at home or in small cottage workshops. For thousands of years, fabric made in this way has provided the cosy covering for nomads' yurts: around fifty fleeces (and a year of work for the average family) were required to make just a single *boyuz*.

Boots, slippers, childrens' dolls and traditional *ala-kiyiz* hats are also still made of felt. But the most widespread use of the material these days are the strikingly beautiful *shyrdak* carpets you'll see in the markets and emporia of Bishkek and elsewhere. Closely woven and boldly patterned using traditional motifs in wonderfully vibrant hues, the rugs are the ultimate souvenir of a visit to the country.

Fine examples can be browsed in the shop of the Tumar Art Group in Bishkek -an Aladdin's Cave which your TransIndus guide will be happy to show you around. Anyone keen to see the traditional felt making process in action should also call at the Altyn Kol Co-operative in the town of Kochkor, near Song Kol Lake - an inspirational NGO that provides livelihoods for over a hundred local women.



Roads Less Travelled: The ‘Other Stans’

While Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan attract a steady flow of visitors, neighbouring Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan see comparatively few. There's a simple explanation for this: none hold the poster-piece ancient monuments of the Silk Road cities. They do, however, offer the adventurous traveller with a mouth-watering prospect – a wealth of amazing ancient ruins, spectacular landscapes, and some of the most jaw-dropping mountains and glaciers in the world, all with an almost total absence of fellow tourists. Moreover, the welcome the few foreigners who travel in the ‘Other Stans’ can expect is disarmingly warm and generous.

Whether in the cities or remote, roadless valleys of the Pamirs, travelling in this part of the world is guaranteed to induce culture shock – in the most positive and inspirational sense. Bolstered by oil and gas revenue, the big cities possess some of the most outlandish and monolithic architecture you'll ever set eyes on. Beyond them, however, lie vast regions of desert, steppe and snow peaks seemingly bypassed by the modern era. But this was not always a cultural backwater. Centuries ago, the likes of Merv and Konye-Urgench – now little more than eroded mounds of clay and sandstone bricks – were some of the most sophisticated, prosperous and beautiful cities in the Islamic world.

Read through this short rundown of highlights of the three ‘Other Stans’ and you'll wonder, like us, why so few people visit them. Those that do, however, return feeling not only as if they've had a stimulating holiday, but really travelled.



Kazakhstan

A vast country the size of Western Europe, Kazakhstan is the wealthiest of the Stans – a fact reflected in the showpiece modern architecture of the capital, Astana, and largest city, Almaty. Both have benefited greatly from the oil and gas profits in recent decades, and hold the most sophisticated hotels and restaurant in the region. It is, however, more to hike in the beautiful Tianshan mountains, and to hunt for rare orchids or spot snow leopards in the Aksu-Zhabagly Nature Reserve, that visitors come to Kazakhstan.



Tajikistan

The wildest, poorest and most rugged of the Stans, Tajikistan also boasts some of the finest mountain scenery in Asia. A sinuous road known as the Pamir Highway (aka ‘M41’) winds through the cream of it, crossing the heart of the legendary Pamir Range, known locally as ‘bami-dunya’, or ‘roof of the world’, where Russia and Great Britain jostled for influence during the era of the ‘Great Game’ in the 19th century. A region reminiscent of the Hindu Kush and parts of the Tibetan Plateau, Tajikistan's lunar-like valleys cower beneath giant, sun-lit ice peaks, where tiny stone villages cluster around splashes of vivid green barley terraces. Family-run homestays provide basic food and accommodation along this astounding road, which winds from Khorog, on the Afghan border, to Osh in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan – a trip that dovetails well with a tour of the great Silk Road cities of Uzbekistan (Samarkand is only a couple of hours' drive from the Tajik capital, Dushanbe).

Turkmenistan

Uzbekistan's neighbour, Turkmenistan, is riding high on oil and gas money these days, a considerable portion of which appears to have been lavished on its capital, Ashgabat. Vast, extravagantly gilded marble palaces and statues of the former dictator, Saparmyrat Niyazov (aka ‘Turkmenbashi’) line the great squares and boulevards, whose gleaming grandeur form a striking counterpoint to the little visited ancient sites scattered around the Karakum Desert here. Foremost among these are Merv – once one of the great cities on the Silk Road – and Konye-Urgench (Old Urgench) – both UNESCO listed World Heritage Sites.

The other intriguing sight – surely one of the most captivating and surreal in all of Asia – is the Darvaza Gas Crater, a 69-metre-across (226-ft) depression in the desert spewing methane gas flames. It is thought to have been the result of abortive oil exploration attempts in the Soviet era.

Exploring Central Asia

While the transport infrastructure of these former Soviet states has (with the exception of Tajikistan) improved dramatically over the past decade or so, you can still expect a wide range of road conditions, especially in the mountains, where surfaces suffer from heavy snowfall during the winter. Long journeys are frequent, and toilet facilities along the way may be basic. The pay offs for such privations, however, are some of the world's most awe-inspiring scenery, and an experience of visiting remote communities that you'll remember forever.

In the cities, facilities for travellers are generally of a high standard. You'll be staying in clean, comfortable hotels with en-suite rooms. Quality restaurants are plentiful and, being a great source of national pride, the main monuments are impeccably well presented.

When to Go | Central Asia experiences wild extremes of temperature. While high summer (June-August) in the desert regions tends to be blisteringly hot, in winter the thermometer may not rise above freezing for weeks on end. For exploring the monuments, spring and autumn are preferable, with dependably blue skies, warm sunshine and pleasant evenings the norm. From late-October, temperatures in the mountains start to plummet, and heavy snow closes some high passes from November until April.

International Flights | Tashkent is the gateway most frequently used for travelling to Uzbekistan, while Bishkek is the main entry point for Kyrgyzstan. Direct flights to Tashkent are available on Uzbekistan Airlines, taking just 7hrs - by far the most convenient option. Turkish Airlines also fly to Tashkent and Bishkek via Istanbul; Aeroflot via Moscow or Sheremetyevo are other possibilities. Flight times for indirect routings range between 10hrs and 24hrs.

Travel Within Central Asia | Most of your journeys will be conducted by private car. You'll be accompanied by a driver and English-speaking guide who will remain with you for the duration of your stay. Rail travel is also sometimes

used, notably in Uzbekistan, where train services between the major cities are a lot faster and more comfortable than travelling by road.

If your itinerary involves connections between the Central Asian countries, you'll almost certainly have to catch a flight or two. One exception is the trip between Kyrgyzstan and China, over the Tianshan Mountains via the Torugart Pass, which is one of our recommended overland routes in the Silk Road region.

Accommodation | International-standard four- and five-stars are widely available in the capital and hub cities, and in tourist centres such as Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. Elsewhere, smaller, family-run hotels and guest houses are the norm. In rural areas, particularly on the fringes of the desert and around the shores of lakes in Kyrgyzstan, yurt camps provide atmospheric, seasonal accommodation for travellers. The yurts themselves are attractively furnished with proper beds, and decorated with locally woven rugs and carpets. They also have wood burning stoves. Hot showers are generally available. Our consultants know which camps are best situated and set up, and will be happy to discuss the options with you.

Suggested Itineraries

As with the ancient trade routes that inspired the three fabulous journeys sketched on these pages, Central Asia offers many, and varied potential itineraries. You can focus on monuments and culture, or opt for an activity-based holiday delving into the mountains on foot or horseback, staying in remote yurt camps and experiencing the kind of wilderness and ways of life

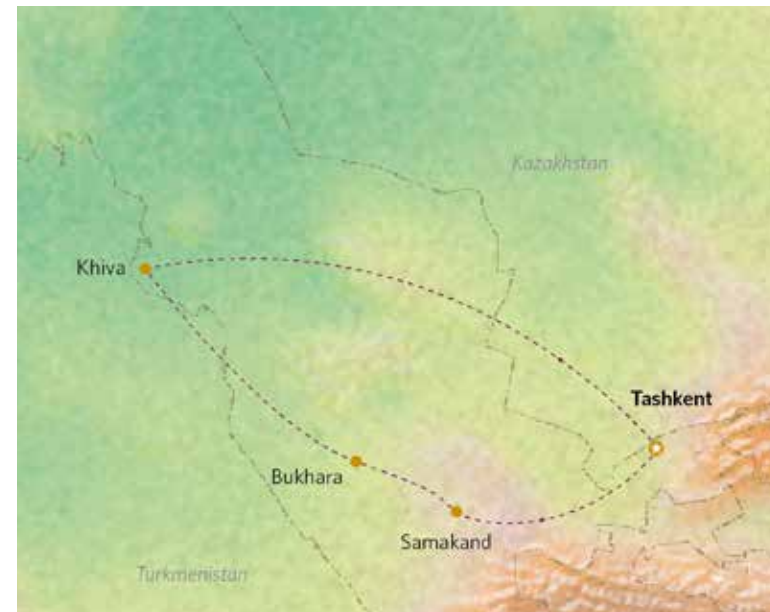
the old silk traders would have recognized. Or you can combine elements of all these into a superbly diverse trip, culminating with a helitour to the heart of the Tianshan range! Have a browse through the preceding pages, and talk through your preferences with one of our specialist Central Asia consultants, who will be able to devise the perfect combination.

Great Cities of the Silk Road: Uzbekistan | 12 Days

The cream of the Central Asia's Timurid monuments and medieval bazaars

If you've been seduced by an image of a magnificent tiled mosque, tomb or madrasa framed by patchworks of flat rooftops or endless desert, chances are it'll feature on this tour of Uzbekistan's cultural highlights. The trip begins with a day of acclimatization in the capital, Tashkent. From there you'll travel to Khiva in the far west, where you'll spend a couple of days marvelling at the emerald-domed wonders of the Khans, before moving on to Bukhara and the Shaybanid Dynasty's architectural masterpieces. These would be a hard act to follow by any standards, but Samarkand manages to transcend all superlatives - an ensemble of medieval buildings that never fail to dazzle, providing an appropriately spectacular closing cadence to this trip. A leisurely interlude back in the capital provides time to shop and take in the museums ahead of your flight home.

Covering all the unmissable monuments, this tour could profitably be extended by a few days to include the forts of the Kyzylkum or a homestay with a Kazakh family in the desert. It can also be slotted together with our tour of Kyrgyzstan to create an itinerary of extraordinary contrasts.



UK — Tashkent — Khiva (2 nights) — Bukhara (2 nights) — Samarkand (3 nights) — Tashkent (2 nights) — UK

Nomads and Mountains: Kyrgyzstan | 16 Days

The country's signature landscapes, featuring an inspirational 5-day mountain trek

One of our absolute favourite tours in Asia is this overland trip through Kyrgyzstan, which involves a memorable, and at times strenuous, 5-day trek, for which you'll need to be in good physical shape.

Once you've savoured the distinctive post-Soviet atmosphere of the capital, Bishkek, sun-lit mountainscapes and shimmering lakes form a relentlessly breathtaking backdrop to your road journey into the Tianshan range. After a few days basking on the shores of beautiful lakes, you'll be head deep into the mountains, exploring the red rocks of Jety Orguz before beginning one of the great treks of Central Asia - a route that's best undertaken in the spring when the tulips, crocuses, giant edelweiss and other wildflowers are at their most profuse. Highpoints include the crossing of the Telety Pass (3,800m) and close-up views of Karakol (5,216m), the loftiest peak in the Terskey Ala-Too range. On the final day, you'll descend the awesome Altyn Arashan Gorge to rejoin your car and driver for the transfer to Cholpon Ata, a resort town on Issyk Kul lake for a well-earned spot of R&R, before swinging west the following day to the capital and your flight home.



UK — Bishkek (2 nights) — Song Kol (2 nights) — Issyk Kul — Karakol — Jety Orguz — Telety Pass — Karakol Gorge — Karakol Peak — Ala Kol Lake — Arashan Gorge — Cholpon Ata — Bishkek — UK

Ultimate Silk Road | 28 Days

The definitive extended tour covering world-renowned sites in three countries

For anyone hooked on the romance of the ancient Silk Road, this epic, month-long tour has it all. You get to experience the full gamut of exotic landscapes explored by Sven Hedin and Aurel Stein, and visit all the legendary bazaar cities that once formed stepping stones for caravans crossing from China to the West. Unlike the intrepid souls of former eras, however, you'll be travelling in great comfort, crossing over the shifting dunes of the Taklamakan in a jet plane rather than on a Bactrian camel (though there will be opportunities for short rides should you wish!).

That said, the route does include its fair share of overland adventure - not least the traverse of the Torugart Pass, the famous passage through the Tianshan range dividing Xinjiang in the far west of China from Kyrgyzstan. Long days on the road are numerous, but never arduous. You'll be driven in a plush vehicle, and have the distraction of some of the world's most awe-inspiring scenery to gaze at through your window. We call this gold-standard route between Xi'an and Khiva our 'Ultimate' tour because, by our reckoning, it delivers the finest experience possible over the span of one month.



UK — Xi'an (2 nights) — Dunhuang (2 nights) — Urumqi (3 nights) — Kashgar (2 nights) — Torugart Pass — Song Kol (2 nights) — Issyk Kul — Karakol (2 nights) — Bishkek (2 nights) — Tashkent (2 nights) — Samarkand (2 nights) — Bukhara (2 nights) — Khiva (2 nights) — Tashkent — UK



How to book your holiday

Having discussed your options with one of our travel consultants and chosen a trip that meets your aspirations, the next step is to confirm your booking by paying a deposit. This is normally 20% of the total cost of the tour, though it may be higher in some instances (such as when river cruises form part of the itinerary). A booking form will need to be completed and returned along with the deposit; the final payment will be due 8 weeks prior to departure.

We suggest you familiarize yourself with our booking terms and conditions, a copy of which you'll be sent along with the booking form. More details may be obtained from your travel consultant.



Visit us at the Old Fire Station

We're always delighted to meet clients at our offices in South Ealing, London. Feel free to drop by to discuss your holiday plans with one of our specialist travel consultants over tea, coffee or a glass of wine. We are open from 9am-5.30pm on weekdays, and 9am-4pm on Saturdays. Our office is located in the Old Fire Station on St Mary's Rd, only 5 minutes' walk from South Ealing station, in West London. If driving, there is a paid car park immediately behind our premises, and free parking around nearby Lammas Park. However you travel to us, to ensure the right people are available to meet with you, it's a good idea to make an appointment by calling us on 020 8566 3739.



TransIndus - Events, blogs & Social media

At TransIndus, we believe visiting a new country - meeting its people and experiencing its culture - should yield far more than just a memorable holiday. A great trip enriches one's life long after it is over. In order to gain a deeper understanding of a destination, many of our clients return to the same one again and again. To inspire and help people keep in touch with their favourite parts of the world, we regularly run events, from illustrated talks to hands-on cultural evenings focussing on different aspects of a country or region. These may be conducted by our own staff, writers, journalists, experts and even a few celebrities! Our staff also regularly visit their specialist destinations and post blogs to share their discoveries.

TransIndus Newsletter

To keep abreast of all that is happening, why not sign up for our newsletter and read our blogs at www.transindus.co.uk

Like us on facebook at www.facebook.com/TransIndusUK

You can also follow us on twitter @[TransIndus_UK](https://twitter.com/TransIndus_UK)

Check out our destination videos on www.youtube.com/user/TransIndus

You can also contact us on 020 8566 3739 or email us at enquiries@transindus.com to discuss your holiday.

Responsible Tourism

TransIndus makes every effort to ensure our holidays have a positive environmental, social and economic impact on the local communities we visit. We support schools, wildlife conservation initiatives and village development projects across Asia, and favour the use of eco-friendly, responsible local hotels, lodges and guest houses along with sustainable adventure and activities.

Aid For Japan

AID FOR JAPAN On 11th March 2011, a major earthquake—followed soon after by a tsunami—devastated a large area of northeastern Japan. A little-reported legacy of the tragedy are the nearly three-hundred children who lost their parents and families in the disaster. Aid For Japan was set up to support the orphans and their carers, and does a terrific job helping to boost their confidence and rebuild lives by organizing summer schools and residential courses, where the children learn new skills and benefit from a range of positive experiences. Aid For Japan also fundraises to bring them on visits to Britain, where they stay with host families and learn about British culture.

As charity founder Akemi Solloway Tanaka explains: '(the orphans) will never forget what happened to them but, with the help of our kind volunteers, we are working hard to bring some normality back to their lives.'

TransIndus are delighted to support AFJ's wonderful initiatives in Japan and the UK. For the full story, visit their website www.aidforjapan.co.uk



Photo Competition

With so many TransIndus clients being keen amateur photographers, we have thoroughly enjoyed the wonderful entries received since our first competition over a decade ago. As you can tell from our brochures and website, we really appreciate the power of a striking image. So if you've travelled to any one of our destinations in the last year (or so), then send us your best travel photographs. The competition is open to everyone, even if you have not yet travelled with us. More information on this can be found on our website: transindus.co.uk/news-events



George Turnbull, Uttoxeter
- Hong Kong Harbour



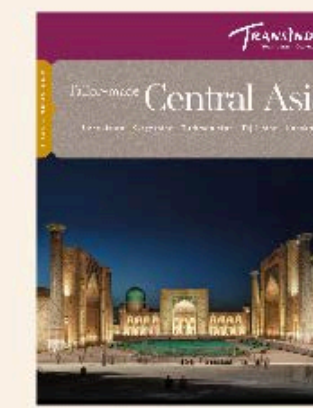
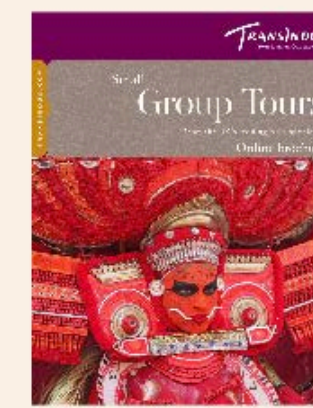
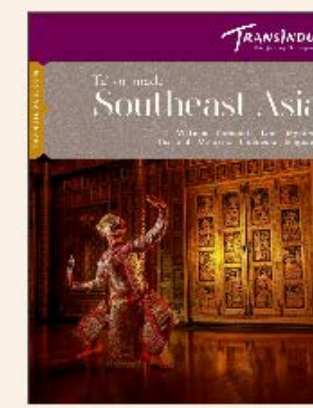
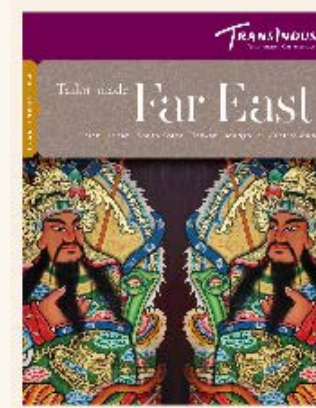
Margaret Simons, High Wycombe
- Geisha Glory, Japan



Lisa Yeo, London
- Rush hour, China

Other TransIndus destinations

If you have enjoyed reading this brochure, why not check out our other offerings, covering tailor-made holidays to the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia and Group Tours throughout Asia.



Photography credits | David Abram, Shivjit Bagga, Chinmay Vasavada, Hilary Sillis, Fiona Cone, Anthony Ryan, Mayavision and our wonderful destination partners. Picture research: Kesu Summy & the team at TransIndus.

TRANSINDUS

Your journey. Our expertise.

China | Japan | South Korea | Taiwan | Mongolia | Central Asia



My consultant at TransIndus was responsive and a delight, especially with the very short lead time and numerous constraints. The guide in Tokyo was terrific, very knowledgeable, patient & tireless. Overall I had a great experience in Japan and really loved Mt Koya, the walk through the cemetery, and also the meditation session at the Shukubo.

Janet Swaysland, Boston - Travelled to Japan

First and foremost, we were very happy with the whole journey. We were keen to get to know a bit more of Korea and its background history and learn more about the country. We were happy with our visit and guide. The hotel in the centre of Seoul was good and impressive. Overall we were very impressed.

Ernest Boost, London - Travelled to South Korea & Japan

We are back from our China holiday and I have to say, it was the best organised holiday that I have ever been on. Thanks very much for your good advice and preparation in making it an unforgettable experience. Thanks again.

Susan Botha, Johannesburg - Travelled to China



Thank you for organising a wonderful trip to Taiwan and Hong Kong. Everything was perfect and we managed to do all the sightseeing we wanted, with a super guide. Hotels were all good and we loved the food, seemed to eat the whole time and tried everything - beef noodle soup, hot pot, steamed buns, dim sum. Also discovered a wonderful sushi restaurant in Hong Kong where we ate on several occasions. If you can manage to provide as good and as detailed an tailor made itinerary as the Taiwanese one, you will certainly get business for other parts of the Far East from us.

Gwen Kinghorn, Edinburgh - Travelled to Taiwan & Hong Kong



I have travelled with TransIndus on numerous excellent tours during the last 15 years with many friends. The tours are all planned, with great attention to detail and the hotels have been excellent - we have always had a great time. My three journeys though Uzbekistan have been unforgettable. Few things are more exciting than standing in the Registan Square, walking up the Shah-e-Zinda complex and seeing Tamerlane's tomb in Samarkand. You cannot help being reminded of Marco Polo's explorations in Bukhara or of Babur as he set off to conquer India, where he became Emperor of Hindustan.

Serena Fass, London - Travelled to Uzbekistan & Central Asia

To book and for more information

Call: 020 8566 3739

Email: enquiries@transindus.com

www.transindus.com



TransIndus Limited 75 St Mary's Road & The Old Fire Station, Ealing, London W5 5RH

Registered: 2311988