

Tailor-made

Far East

China | Japan | South Korea | Taiwan | Mongolia



Welcome to TransIndus

For nearly forty years, travelling across Asia has been both my privilege and my profession. Over that time, the Far East has remained firmly rooted in its long-standing cultural traditions, continuing to inspire, move and gently unsettle travellers in equal measure. Even the ever-growing futuristic cities and technological advances of the Asian Tiger Nations make them ever more compelling.

It is no coincidence that leading travel journals now place the Far East among their most inspiring destinations for 2026 and beyond. We welcome this growing appetite for journeys that reward curiosity and patience, and for travel that offers depth, perspective and genuine connection. These principles have long guided the way we at TransIndus design our holidays, and nowhere do they resonate more clearly than in the Far East.

This, our most ambitious luxury tailor-made holiday brochure to date, has been shaped by decades of exploration and by a quiet determination to venture beyond the obvious and delve deeper than the familiar. We hope it will serve you both as a source of inspiration for authentic, meaningful and memorable journeys. As travellers seek to balance the challenges of climate change, overtourism, and the impact on local communities, we help structure your travels so you can mitigate these challenges through rail travel, opening roads less travelled, and ensuring equal partnership with the communities you visit.

Travelling in this way requires care: a measured pace, thoughtful planning and deep local knowledge. Our passionate team and long-standing destination partnerships help ensure traditions are respected and that the communities we visit are left unaltered by our presence.

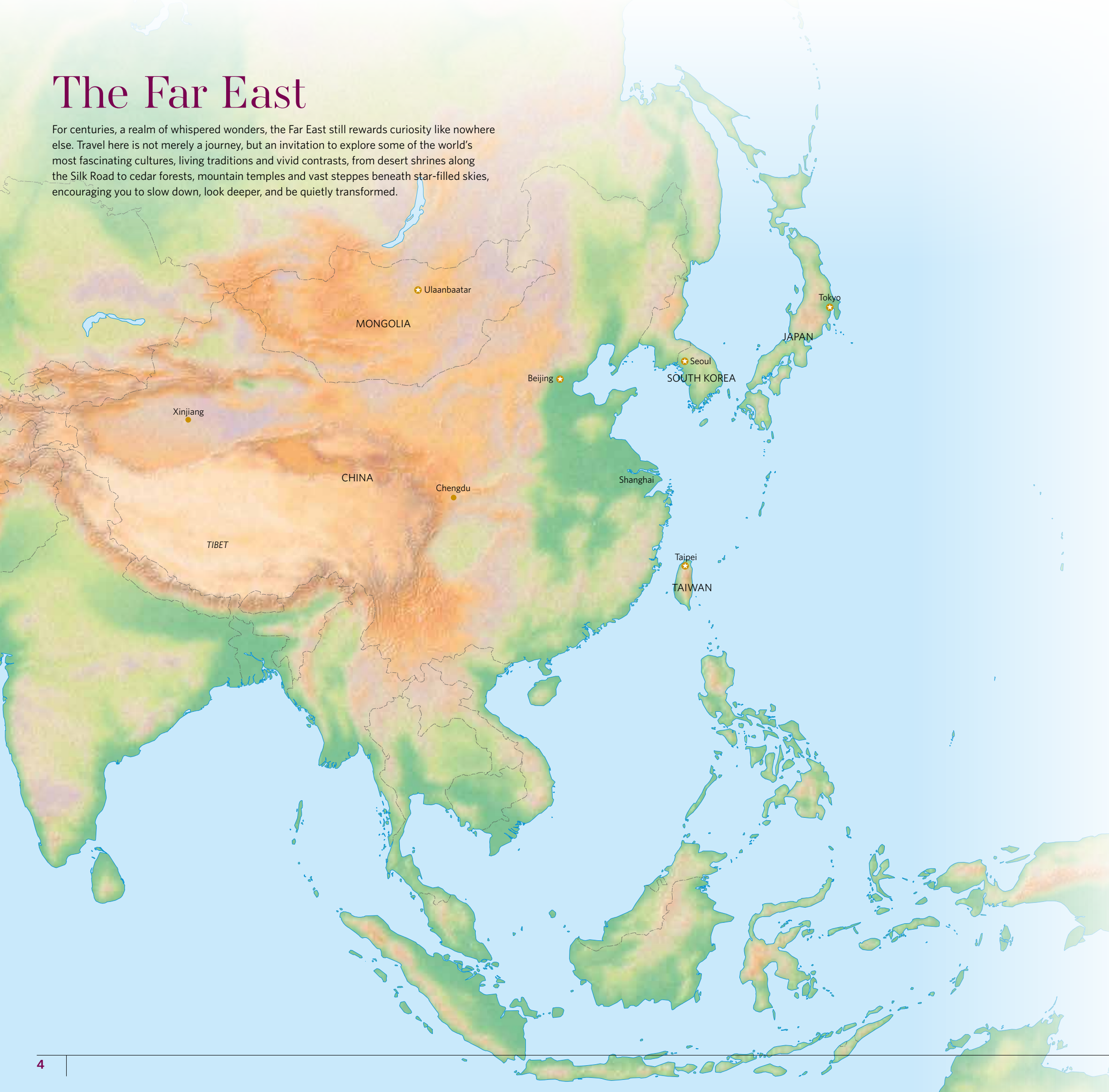
The following pages convey not just knowledge, but affection for landscapes that humble, traditions that endure, and societies whose generosity of spirit continues to inspire us. After nearly four decades, the Far East remains one of the great privileges of our working lives, and I am delighted to share it with you here.

Amrit Singh, Managing Director



The Far East

For centuries, a realm of whispered wonders, the Far East still rewards curiosity like nowhere else. Travel here is not merely a journey, but an invitation to explore some of the world's most fascinating cultures, living traditions and vivid contrasts, from desert shrines along the Silk Road to cedar forests, mountain temples and vast steppes beneath star-filled skies, encouraging you to slow down, look deeper, and be quietly transformed.



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Why Travel with TransIndus

Travel Shaped by Experience, Care & Curiosity

Among the UK's leading specialists in tailor-made travel to Asia, TransIndus designs bespoke journeys across twenty-seven countries throughout the continent. What defines our approach is not simply where we travel, but how — with care, discernment and deep respect for the places we share.

Your Journey | Our Expertise

From our first conversation with you, we take time to understand your interests, preferred pace and personal curiosities, ensuring the itinerary we offer you is shaped around you rather than a fixed template. Each journey is refined collaboratively, until every element feels considered and balanced.

Expert, Regional Specialists

Our consultants are passionate specialists who travel regularly within their countries of expertise. Their knowledge is practical, first-hand and personal, allowing them to offer thoughtful guidance on authentic experiences, how best to experience both iconic sights and quieter alternatives and where to seek quiet tranquillity.

Freedom to Travel Your Way

Tailor-made travel offers you the freedom to follow your interests, explore lesser-known destinations, or simply slow the pace down. Our itineraries remain flexible yet carefully structured, allowing your journey to unfold naturally and entirely unique to you.

Thoughtful Expert Advice

We take pride in the details that elevate your journey: well-chosen hotels, scenic routes, quieter alternatives to crowded sights, and memorable places to pause along the way. Every recommendation is made with care, insight and first-hand knowledge.

Seamless Planning & Delivery

From international and domestic flights to private transfers, accommodation and daily logistics, we manage every practical element of your journey. Dining preferences and timing are discussed in advance, ensuring everything flows smoothly from start to finish.

With You, Throughout Your Journey

As your departure approaches, detailed travel documents are sent well in advance, followed by personalised guidance before you leave. While you are travelling, trusted local representatives and our London office — available 24 hours a day — provide discreet support, reassurance and expert assistance whenever needed.

Great Feedback

Our clients often tell us they return home feeling enriched, reassured and already planning their next journey. This sentiment is reflected in our independent Trustpilot rating of 4.9*, built on consistently thoughtful service, careful planning and holidays that exceed expectations — time after time.



Planning Your Tailor-Made Holidays

At TransIndus, every journey begins with a conversation. We know our guests place great value on their holidays, often investing considerable thought into where they wish to go and how they hope to travel. Our role is to listen carefully, interpret those ideas, and translate them into a journey that feels personal, balanced and deeply rewarding. Whether over the phone or in person at our London office, we take time to understand your interests, your pace and your aspirations. From this initial exchange, your specialist consultant will begin shaping an itinerary that reflects not only how long you wish to travel and your budget, but also what excites and inspires you. This first draft is never final; it evolves through discussion and refinement until every element feels right.

Choosing a tailor-made holiday offers freedom. While each destination has its celebrated highlights, there is rarely a single way to experience them. You may wish to pursue a particular theme, linger longer in one place, or include quieter regions alongside iconic sights. Having explored each country in depth, often repeatedly, our consultants are able to suggest the most rewarding routes, pacing and experiences — and the order in which they naturally unfold.

Smooth, well-planned travel underpins everything we do. We arrange all transport in advance, favouring private, air-conditioned vehicles in most destinations to allow flexibility and comfort, while also incorporating domestic flights where distances demand. In Japan, the country's superb rail network often provides an elegant and efficient alternative. Carefully selected English-speaking local guides accompany you where insight and context add depth, from historic sites and sacred places to markets and rural landscapes.

Accommodation plays a central role in how a country is experienced. Alongside landmark luxury hotels, we favour characterful heritage properties and smaller boutique hotels where the setting, architecture and atmosphere enhance 'a sense of place'. Throughout this brochure, we highlight hotels that offer exceptional service and value, and your specialist travel consultant will be able to recommend newer or lesser-known options alongside some hidden gems where appropriate, tailored to your journey's pace, style.

The result is a journey that flows naturally, revealing each destination at its best — thoughtfully planned, personally shaped, and designed to linger in the memory long after you return home.

Essential Travel Information



International Flights

We work with a carefully selected range of airlines to ensure comfortable, reliable routing for your journey. Wherever possible, we recommend direct services, though indirect flights via the Middle East may suit those wishing to include a stopover. Holidays are priced in economy class unless otherwise requested, with upgrades available.

Guides & Transport

Private, chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned vehicles are our preferred mode of transport in most destinations, allowing flexibility and frequent stops. Longer distances may require domestic flights, which we will advise on at the planning stage. Qualified English-speaking local guides accompany you where appropriate, offering insight and assistance throughout.



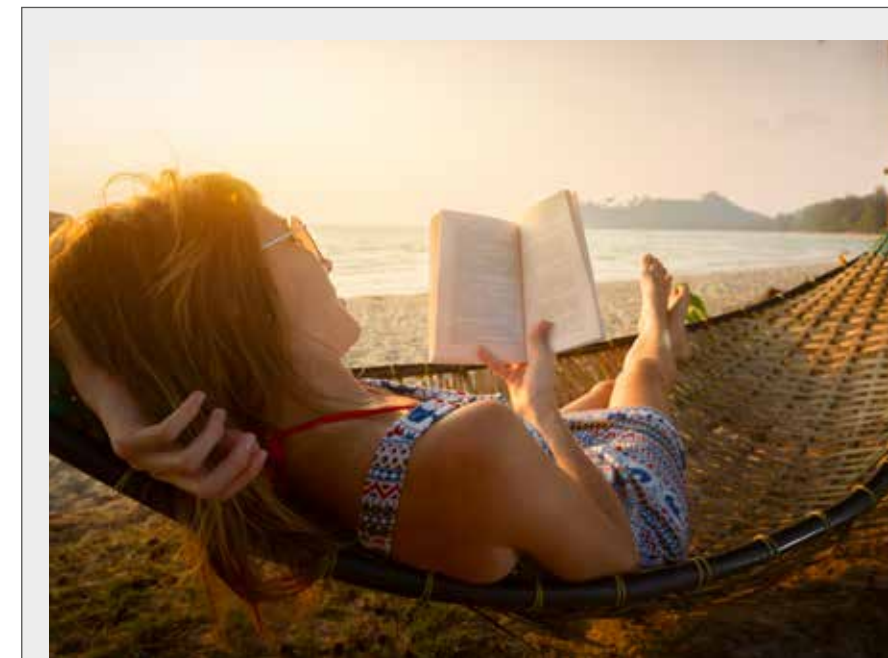
Food & Dietary Requirements

Exploring regional cuisine is one of the great pleasures of travel in Asia. We encourage guests to enjoy authentic local food, and all recommended restaurants are personally tried and tested. Please advise us of any dietary requirements or allergies so arrangements can be made in advance.



Accommodation

Selecting the right accommodation is central to the enjoyment of any journey. We carefully assess every property we use, favouring comfort, character and location. Alongside established luxury hotels, we recommend heritage and boutique properties where atmosphere and setting enhance the experience. In remote regions, options may be limited, but we always select the best available.



Passport & Visa Information

Your passport must be valid for at least six months beyond your return date and endorsed with all required visas. While responsibility for obtaining visas rests with the traveller, your consultant will provide clear guidance and can recommend trusted visa partners if assistance is required.

Travel Insurance

Comprehensive travel insurance is essential from the time of booking until the end of your holiday, including travel to and from your destination. We are happy to recommend trusted insurance partners should you need assistance arranging appropriate cover.

Fitness to Travel & Special Requirements

Most itineraries involve some walking, occasionally on uneven ground or steps. Please inform us of any mobility considerations or special requirements so we can advise appropriately and tailor your journey with care.

Health Advice

We recommend consulting your GP or travel clinic at least six weeks prior to departure regarding vaccinations or health precautions for your destination. Some vaccinations require multiple doses. Up-to-date guidance is also available online through recognised NHS travel health resources.

Cultural Awareness

Local customs, infrastructure and attitudes may differ from those at home — often part of the richness of travel. An open mind and a flexible approach will enhance your experience, while our local representatives are always available to assist should any concerns arise.

Financial Protection

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 will be looked after.

Flight inclusive holidays are covered by our Air Travel Organiser's License (ATOL 3429) issued 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 addition, we are proud members of the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO), whose 'Client's Charter' assures you receive the highest standards of service.





China

Cut off from the rest of Asia by the Russian steppes to the north and the Himalayas to the south, China has spent millennia refining and re-imagining its ancient cultures. Today's headlong rush toward modernity may echo Western forms, but it unfolds in a way that is unmistakably Chinese—infusing travel option with a sense of discovery found nowhere else. Despite the dramatic transformation toward modernity, China's iconic sights—the Great Wall, the Forbidden City in Beijing, the Terracotta Army, the Yangtze Gorges, and the dreamlike limestone peaks around Guilin and Yangshuo—continue to captivate with enduring grandeur. For a deeper, more intimate encounter with ancient China, we suggest exploring lesser-known towns and villages tucked between the great cities, or, if time allows, venturing to the country's remote southern and western reaches. Here, in places like Yunnan and the Tibetan plateau, you'll find landscapes of sublime beauty and cultures that have remained remarkably untouched—where age old traditions, architecture offer a window into the soul of China.



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. (Pg14)

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! (Pg17)

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. (Pg 22)

Tibet | Tibet enchants with its vast, windswept plateaus, jewel-toned monasteries, and timeless spirituality, where silence meets ancient ritual, offering profound serenity and a rare glimpse into a vanishing, world. (Pg58)

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. (Pg38)

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. (Pg52)

'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. (Pg40)

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. (Pg64)

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 (back streets); 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.

See pages 71-73 for suggested itinerary options.



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 Wumen ('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.

The Great Wall of China

China's Great Wall undulates for over 5,500 miles (8,880km) 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 most of the hallmark square lookout towers were erected.

Far more than a mere fortification, the wall also served as a transport corridor, enabling the huge army stationed along its length to move rapidly over terrain that might otherwise have been difficult to traverse. At the same time, the turret acted as a system of 'fire beacons' for communications.

Having been immaculately renovated, the Badaling section of Great Wall near Zhangjiakou, around three hours drive northwest of the capital, is the most photographed stretch: this was the first portion officially opened up to the public and is where visiting dignitaries tend to be brought.

Although easily reachable in a day trip from Beijing, to avoid the queues and crowds we recommend instead visiting the 6-mile (11-km) stretch between Jinshanling and Simatai, which is much wilder and set amid more spectacular scenery, with shadowy ridges rippling to the horizon – ideal terrain for soft trekking. The route, which typically takes 2-3hrs to complete, covers a total of twenty-two towers and some dilapidated (and very steep!) sections of the wall, so you'll need a comfortable pair of trainers or walking shoes, and outdoor clothing. Breathtaking panoramic views accompany the entire walk, which will be guided by one of our team. The portion of the wall around Simatai is also the only one where night hiking is permitted.

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. The scenery is lush and green for much of the year and the crowds considerably lighter than at stretches closer to Beijing.

See pages 71-73 for suggested itinerary options.



Jinshanling Great Wall Hotel

Ideally located at the foot of the Jinshanling section of the Great Wall, this hotel offers direct access to one of the most scenic and least crowded stretches of the Wall. Known for its dramatic mountain setting and photogenic watchtowers, Jinshanling is particularly magical at sunrise and sunset, perfect for photographers and early risers alike. Styled in traditional northern Chinese courtyard architecture, with tiled roofs, carved wooden screens, and quiet inner courtyards that offer a welcome sense of retreat after a day's walking. Manicured gardens and shaded pavilions enhance the tranquil atmosphere. The rooms are spacious, clean, many have views of the surrounding hills. The restaurant serves hearty local fare and generous breakfasts that cater to both Chinese and Western tastes. Friendly English-speaking staff are on hand at all times to assist. Day excursions to other parts of the Great Wall like Simatai and Gubeikou are easily organised from here.



Vangen Spa hotel in Gubeikou

Tucked away in the quiet village of Gubeikou, the Vangen Spa Hotel offers an intimate and refined retreat near one of the Great Wall's most atmospheric and unrestored sections. With just a handful of spacious, well-appointed suites, the property blends minimalist contemporary design with traditional Chinese accents—think whitewashed walls, stone courtyards, heated floors, and floor-to-ceiling windows framing the mountain landscape. The in-room hot tubs and private terraces make it especially appealing for couples or travellers seeking privacy and relaxation. A small but elegant spa offers massages and herbal soaks, while landscaped gardens and koi ponds add to the hotel's tranquil charm. Meals are beautifully presented, combining fresh local ingredients with home-style Chinese cooking and Western touches. English-speaking staff provide attentive, personalised service, ensuring a calm, restorative experience amid dramatic natural surroundings.



Northern China: Beyond The Great Wall



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.



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.



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.



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 up-swept roofs and wooden galleries of the shrine have hung precariously over the same void for nearly 1,500 years. Oak beams driven into post-holes in the cliff provide support for this gravity-defying edifice, whose halls, hollowed from the rocks, contain Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian deities.



Harbin and the Ice Festival

Formerly the last outpost before 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.

Harbin's principal attraction, however, is the great Ice Festival held here each January-February, for which teams of artists carve a fairy land of castles 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.

Tian Chi, Heavenly Lake & 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!



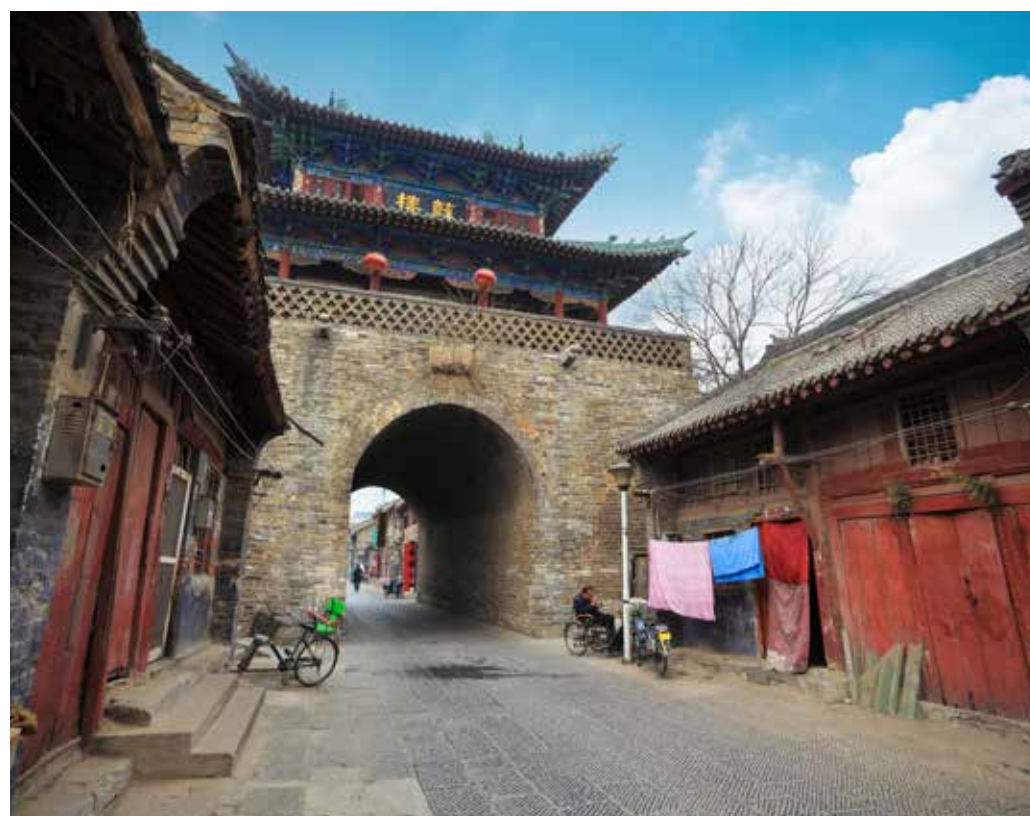
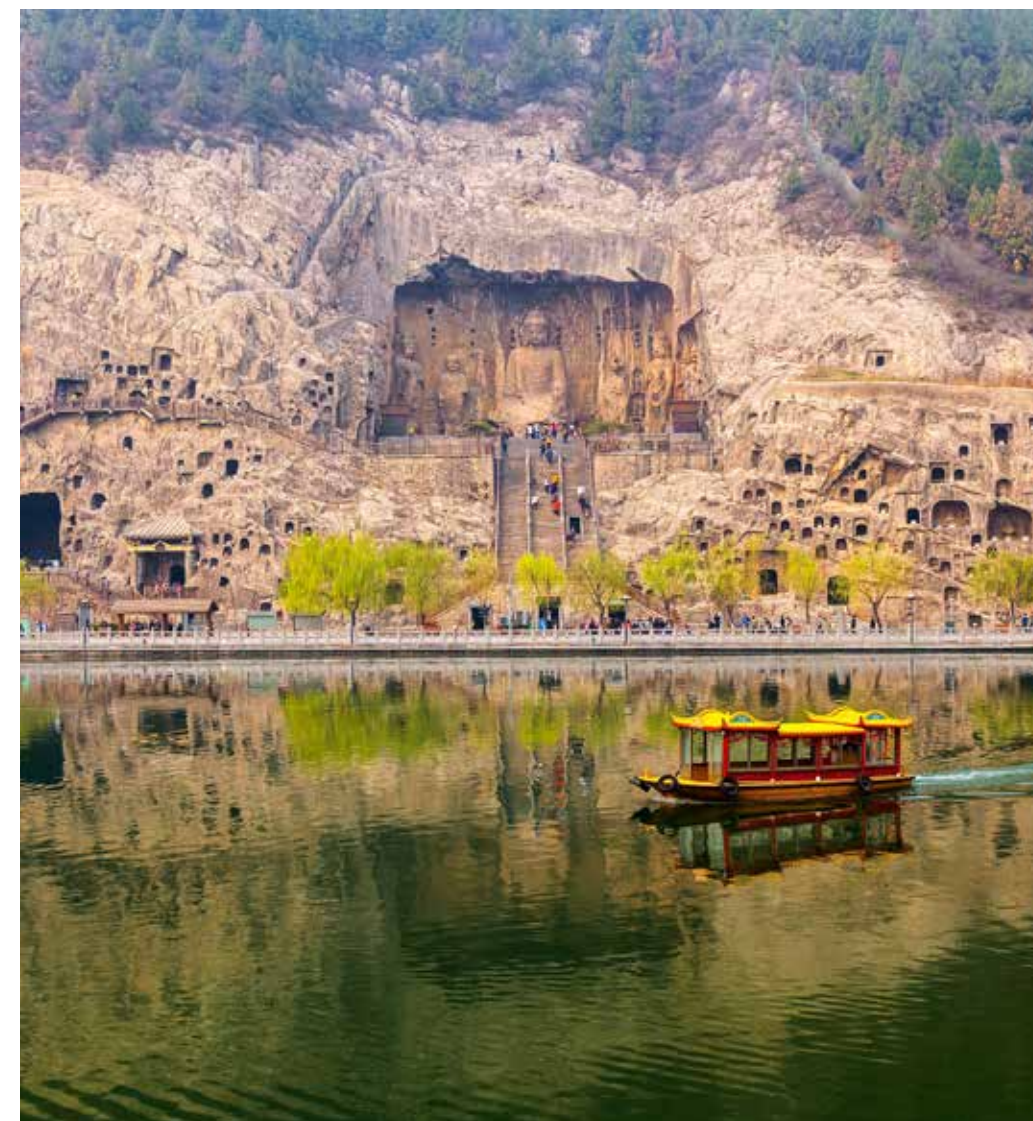
Pingyao

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 shop-fronts 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 roof-scape of red-tiled, up-swept 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 super fast 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 favorites. They can all easily be slotted into a tailor-made tour.



Sanxingdui Ceremonial masks and 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.





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.

See pages 71-73 for suggested itinerary options.



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.



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 back-streets 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.



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.



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 River Cruising

Some of China's most spectacular scenery lies along the course of the Yangtze River. For centuries, waterfalls and rapids made navigation treacherous, but since the completion of a series of 'mega-dams' in 2003, cruise ships have been able to sail all the way from Chongqing in the west to Shanghai on the eastern seaboard.

The highlights of this superb journey are the awe-inspiring 'Three Gorges' – a trio of deep channels through the Wu mountain range. Numerous archaeological sites also punctuate the route, the most scenic stretches of which can be covered in three to four days, depending on the direction of travel.

Please see our website www.transindus.com for cruise itineraries and departure dates.



Sanctuary Yangtze Explorer

Sanctuary Yangtze Explorer offers ultra-luxury and highly personalised service aboard the most exclusive vessel on the river. With just 62 suites, it feels more like a floating boutique hotel than a cruise ship.

Days unfold gracefully, with private balcony views of the majestic Three Gorges, expert-led excursions to ancient river towns and temples, and enriching onboard experiences—from tai chi to calligraphy. A niche itinerary includes rare access to the UNESCO-protected Shennongjia Nature Reserve.

With flawless service, elegant interiors, and curated cultural encounters, this is Yangtze cruising for the discerning traveller in search of depth, comfort, and exclusivity.



Century Cruises

Century Cruises operates a robust fleet of large, contemporary vessels, offering flexibility and scale without compromising on style. Their spacious ships—each with hundreds of balcony cabins—cater to travellers seeking a well-rounded Yangtze experience.

From classic Three Gorges itineraries between Chongqing and Yichang to extended journeys reaching Shanghai, Century's cruises combine dramatic river scenery with insightful excursions to ancient cliff-side shrines, pagodas, and villages.

On board, guests enjoy excellent leisure facilities, lively cultural performances, and fine Chinese and international cuisine. Ideal for those who appreciate space, variety, and modern comforts on one of the world's most iconic waterways.

Victoria Cruises

Victoria Cruises provides reliable mid-range luxury with a slightly smaller fleet and comfortable, Western-friendly accommodations tailored to international tourists. For over twenty years, their ships have glided through the Three Gorges, calling at evocative sites such as Fengdu's Ghost City, Shibaozhai Pagoda, and the monumental Three Gorges Dam.

With bilingual staff, relaxed onboard hospitality, and thoughtfully paced excursions, Victoria suits those seeking comfort and familiarity while journeying through China's riverine heartland.

Expect smooth logistics, polished service, and an intimate look at riverside life—ideal for travellers who value ease and authenticity over ostentation.





Shanghai Sites

The contemporary pleasures of shopping, dining and gallery-hopping are very much the order of the day in Shanghai, especially along Nanjing Road, the city's iconic shopping boulevard, which stretches from the historic Bund to People's Square. Lined with flagship stores, high-end boutiques and glittering malls, it's the retail heart of modern China. Just off the square, you'll find the superb Shanghai Museum, home to one of the world's finest collections of Chinese bronzes, calligraphy, and ceramics, and the sleek, design-led Museum of Art Pudong, showcasing international contemporary exhibitions. Don't miss the exquisite Yu Yuan Gardens, a classical Ming-era haven of pavilions and ponds. For a taste of old Shanghai's colonial charm, wander through the leafy French Concession, or head to the financial district, where elegant eating houses serve cutting-edge cuisine beneath the gleaming skyline.



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

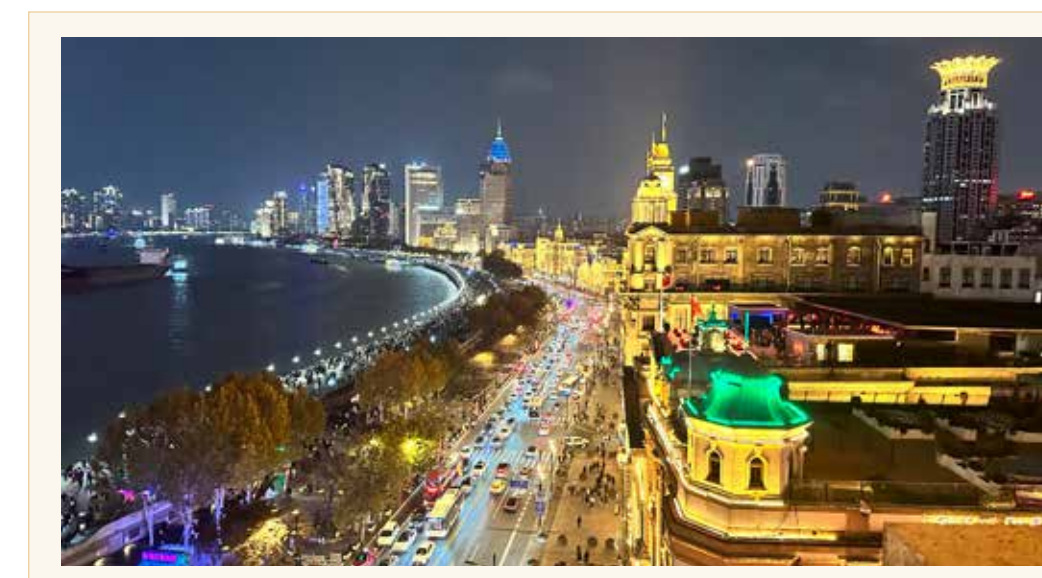
A precious remnant of old China survives on the western fringes of Shanghai at Zhujiajiao – a traditional water town on the Dianpu River. Packed around a network of winding canals is an exceptionally well preserved array of late-medieval shop-houses, temples and ceremonial halls, dating from the era 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 express-ways 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.

See pages 71-73 for suggested itinerary options.



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 mega-cities, 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 moulded 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 back-roads, passing groves of bamboo and old humpback bridges to reach outlying villages.

Worthwhile excursions include a trip to the Wulin 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.



Family Travel Far East

At TransIndus, the most meaningful journeys are those shared across generations. Our family holidays are expertly crafted to offer something for everyone—whether it's the quiet delight of a grandparent wandering through a centuries-old temple, the thrill of a teenager exploring bustling markets, or the wide-eyed wonder of a child seeing a camel for the first time. Asia offers an endlessly enriching experience for multi-generational families.

In **China**, families can marvel together at the Terracotta Warriors in Xi'an or walk hand-in-hand along the Great Wall. Cruise past the karst mountains of the Li River or enjoy dazzling acrobatics in Shanghai. For the ultimate frontier adventure, Mongolia beckons with camel rides across desert dunes, encounters with eagle hunters, the iconic Turtle Rock, and the chance to herd horses across vast open steppe. Share stories with local hosts while cooking traditional meals over open fires, then sleep under the stars in a cosy family yurt.

Japan invites families to unwind in traditional ryokans, dress in local attire, and take part in time-honoured ceremonies. Families can relax together in natural hot spring baths—perfect for soothing tired feet after a day of exploration—while younger children are enchanted by the Snow Monkeys bathing in the hot springs around Jigokudani, Temple deer at Nara and the magic of the Ghibli Museum and futuristic characters in Tokyo. Teenagers and older children are fascinated by the unique immersive experiences offered by Anime Studios and vast manga libraries with collections exceeding hundreds of thousands of comics as well as age old Samurai castles of Osaka, bustling fish markets of Tokyo and the beautifully painted and adorned Geisha in Kyoto.

South Korea and **Taiwan** captivate all ages with their vibrant culture and K-pop. Experience a dance class, dress in Traditional Hanbok, and enjoy family-friendly Korean drama evenings and sightseeing trips that offer a unique blend of fun, education, and cultural immersion. Night markets, folk festivals, and sleek, futuristic cities—while the region's cuisine caters to every palate, from adventurous street food to refined, family-friendly dining. Nature walks among ever-changing terrain are a significant part of any holiday in South Korea and Taiwan.

Seamless logistics combined with thoughtfully planned accommodation provide an enjoyable and immersive experience in Ryokans, Yurts, homestays and traditional houses, in comfort and with complete confidence. Any holiday in Asia becomes more than a holiday—it becomes a bridge between generations, a celebration of culture, and a collection of memories to last a lifetime.

Speak with our specialist team, who will help you design the ideal holiday for your family.





Hong Kong

Hong Kong—'Fragrant Harbour'—was Britain's first foothold on China's coast and today ranks among the world's great financial centres: a true East-meets-West crossroads. Gaze across Victoria Harbour at tiers of glass towers fading into mist-softened hills while junks bob on grey-green chop; little more than 150 years ago this iconic waterfront was a 'barren rock'. Boats still shape city life, but ashore the pleasures abound: follow coils of incense to a Taoist temple; duck from a shower into a steaming noodle canteen or dim-sum hall. Or ride a ferry to old Aberdeen, where sampans weave among trawlers and fishers in conical hats sell jellyfish tentacles and crabs the size of tennis rackets. Speak to our specialists for tailored stays in Hong Kong and its outlying islands, and bespoke island-hopping day trips.



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.



Kowloon and the New Territories

If Hong Kong Island is Manhattan, Kowloon is Brooklyn: brash, bustling, and full of energy. Locals spill into the streets, filling the area with vibrant markets, sizzling street food, and a sense of nonstop movement. Temple Street Night Market draws tourists, but hidden gems like the 150-year-old Tin Hau Temple offer a glimpse of the city's heritage. Sham Shui Po, known for fabric and electronics, clings to its retro charm even as street art like the towering Rainbow Thief mural adds a modern twist.

Nearby Mong Kok, the world's most densely populated district, is best explored on foot. From its flower market to the haunting remains of the Kowloon Walled City, history is never far away.

Beyond the harbour, the New Territories stretch into the hills. Traditional walled villages and scenic hikes—like the 100km MacLehose Trail and the Yuen Tsuen Ancient Trail—offer a breath of fresh air and a vivid contrast to city life.

Hong Kong's Outlying Islands

One of Hong Kong's great joys is how easily you can escape the city to the Outlying Islands, each with its own charm using either the metro or its iconic green-and-white Star Ferry, which offers a scenic, budget-friendly ride across Victoria Harbour.

Lamma Island is known for its relaxed pace, sandy beaches, scenic hiking trails, and excellent seafood. Cheung Chau, with its crowded fishing docks and ramshackle junks, exudes salty, old-world charm—especially during the Bun Festival in May, when towering bamboo structures are covered in buns and locals compete to climb them, accompanied by lion dances and drums.

Over on Lantau Island, the 26-metre Tian Tan Buddha towers above forested hills. Nearby, Tai O village offers a glimpse of traditional stilt-house life, where grilled cuttlefish and local snacks are served straight from the boat. Whether by ferry or metro, Hong Kong's islands offer a refreshing contrast to its frenetic urban core.

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 seafront, 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.



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.

See pages 71-73 for suggested itinerary options.



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 the 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 commercialised 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: 'Flowery 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 commercialised 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.

See pages 71-73 for suggested itinerary options.





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.

See pages 71-73 for suggested itinerary options.



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 Great Gorges of Yunnan

Welcome to one of Asia's last great wildernesses. In the far northwest of Yunnan, towering peaks, plunging gorges and ancient cultures converge in a landscape of almost mythic power. Long known as Yunnan's north-western frontiers, this remote region rewards travellers drawn to unspoilt nature and profound immersion.

At its core lies the Three Parallel Rivers area, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where the Yangtze, Mekong and Salween run astonishingly close for more than 200 kilometres, carving immense chasms into the eastern edge of the Himalayas. Mountains rise towards 7,000 metres; valleys plunge to

depths rivalling the Grand Canyon. Snow leopards, red pandas and snub-nosed monkeys share this dramatic terrain with Tibetan, Naxi, Lisu, Yi and Bai communities whose traditions remain firmly rooted in place.

With air access to Shangri-La, Lijiang, and Dali, the region is increasingly reachable, but it is best experienced slowly overland, by road and on foot, staying in carefully chosen mountain lodges. In return, you encounter a China where ancient customs endure, mass tourism fades away, and nature reigns supreme.



Tiger Leaping Gorge

One of the world's deepest canyons, **Tiger Leaping Gorge** is an unmissable highlight of any Yunnan journey. Here, the Jinsha River (upper Yangtze) hurtles through a chasm flanked by snow-covered peaks, with cliffs rising over 3,700m from the riverbed.

While a road skirts the lower levels, it's the high trail—hiked over two or three days—that offers the most unforgettable experience. Nights are spent in simple but welcoming Naxi guesthouses, and the views, particularly at dawn, are unforgettable.

The trek can be demanding in places, so we provide experienced guides and ponies to carry luggage.



Shangri-La (Zhongdian)

High on the Tibetan Plateau, the town of **Shangri-La** lives up to its legendary name. Snowy peaks rise above grazing yaks and fluttering prayer flags, while Songzanlin Monastery—Yunnan's largest Tibetan lamasery—overlooks a lake where monks and villagers gather at dawn.

The town's Old Quarter, rebuilt in traditional style after a fire, is a charming place to shop and stroll, filled with teahouses, galleries and cafés.

Nearby, luxurious lodges provide a peaceful base for exploring Tibetan culture, scenic valleys and high-altitude trails.

The Three Parallel Rivers Region

This vast, protected area encompasses a mosaic of mighty rivers, jagged ridgelines and remote forested valleys. **The Three Parallel Rivers**—the Yangtze, Mekong and Salween—have carved dramatic gorges that shelter an extraordinary range of plant and animal species, many found nowhere else on Earth.

Isolated from modern development, the region feels timeless, with stone-built villages, colourful minority festivals, and trails that follow in the footsteps of Joseph Rock, the intrepid plant hunter who first brought this landscape to the world's attention.





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.

See pages 71-73 for suggested itinerary options.



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

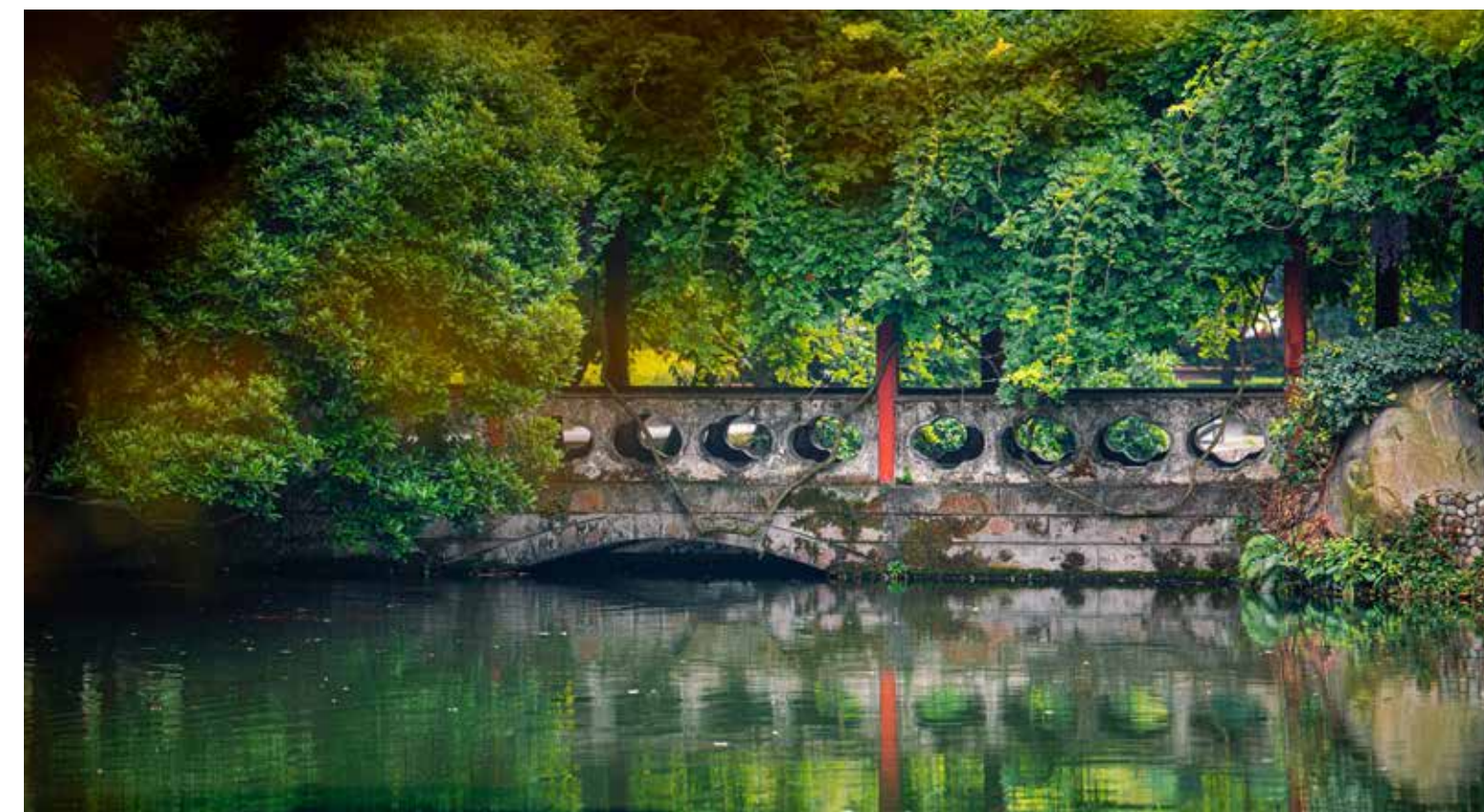
Nestled amid a phalanx of glass-sided skyscrapers at the heart of the city's trendiest shopping district, the Temple House is an artful fusion of antique and modern. Its entrance occupies a restored Qing-era building, complete with arched stone gateway flanked by half-timbered gables, but inside, minimalist 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.





Tea: The Leaf That Shaped Empires

Wars have been fought over it, and the fortunes of empires decided by its trade. But the humble tea plant, *Camellia 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 Hongwu 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 high-born ladies in Jane Austen's day.





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 yak's 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.

See pages 71-73 for suggested itineraries to Tibet.



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 lime-wash. 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 Young husband'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.





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.

Gansu & Xinjing

China's Ancient Silk Road

China's Ancient Silk Road was born of a daring diplomatic mission in 139 BC, when Han envoy Zhang Qian ventured beyond the Great Wall into the wilds of Central Asia. His perilous 13-year journey opened channels of trade and cultural exchange that would link East and West for centuries. The route's famed caravans carried silk, spices, paper, and gunpowder westward, while Buddhism, grapes, and glass flowed east. Monasteries, market towns, and fortress outposts flourished along the way, their remnants still visible across Gansu and Xinjiang. UNESCO's 2014 designation of the Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor celebrates this extraordinary 3,000-mile artery, anchored by the ancient capitals of Xi'an and Luoyang. Modern travellers can now retrace this fabled path in comfort, across deserts, mountain passes and vibrant oases — with the option to continue westward into Central Asia, following in the footsteps of Silk Road merchants through to the fabled cities of Samarkand and Bukhara.

See pages 71-73 for suggested tours to this region.



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.

Crescent Lake & the Singing Dunes

On the desert fringes of Dunhuang, a landscape of almost theatrical contrast unfolds. The Singing Dunes, known locally as Mingsha Shan, surge from the sands in long, sculpted ridges, their crests rising more than 250 metres above the plain. When the wind sweeps across them, the dunes emit a low, resonant murmur — a haunting sound that has inspired travellers, poets and pilgrims for centuries.

Nestled improbably at their base lies Crescent Lake, a delicate arc of spring-fed water that has defied encroaching sands for over two millennia. This life-giving oasis once offered respite to Silk Road caravans, its presence affirmed by a modest Buddhist pagoda that still marks the shoreline. Tamarisk and poplar soften the margins, creating a rare pocket of green amid the ochre desert.

Exploration here is unhurried and atmospheric: camel caravans trace ancient routes across the dunes, sand slides provide moments of playful exhilaration, and elevated viewpoints reveal a vast, rippling sea of sand. As the light fades, the desert seems to breathe, leaving a powerful sense of stillness and wonder.



Xiahe & the Labrang Monastery

Southwest of Bingling, the landscape softens into rolling grasslands and forested hills, signalling the outer reaches of Tibetan cultural influence. At its heart lies Xiahe, a lively market town dominated by the golden roofs and whitewashed walls of Labrang Monastery. Founded in 1709, Labrang is the most important Tibetan Buddhist monastery outside Tibet itself and remains a centre of spiritual learning and devotion.

Several hundred Gelugpa monks reside here, while pilgrims arrive year-round to walk the 3-kilometre ritual circuit encircling the monastery. The path is lined with thousands of prayer wheels, turned slowly by hands weathered from high-plateau life. Within the chapels, butter lamps cast a warm glow over gilded images and vividly painted thangkas, creating an atmosphere both intimate and profound.

An overnight stay reveals more than the monastery alone. Trails lead into the surrounding hills, while the nearby Sangke Grasslands offer encounters with nomadic families who welcome visitors into their tents with tea and freshly made yak yoghurt. It is a gentle, human counterpoint to Labrang's monumental spiritual presence.



Jiayuguan & the Hexi Corridor

Between the high Tibetan Plateau and the arid reaches of the Gobi lies the Hexi Corridor — a long, strategic passage that once carried ideas, beliefs and precious goods across Asia. Extending for almost 1,000 kilometres, this ribbon of oases formed the northern artery of the Silk Road, allowing caravans to pass between China's heartland and the distant western frontiers.

At its narrowest point stands Jiayuguan Fort, the western terminus of the Great Wall and one of imperial China's most formidable outposts. Rising from the plain against a backdrop of snow-dusted mountains, the fortress was designed not only for defence but for control — a final checkpoint between civilisation and the unknown. Exiles once passed through its gates, bound for the harsh expanses beyond.

Today, Jiayuguan is impressively preserved, its walls, towers and parade grounds offering a vivid sense of frontier life. Standing atop the ramparts, one gains a powerful appreciation of the corridor's historical weight — a place where empires ended, journeys began, and cultures quietly converged.



Bingling Si 'Thousand Buddha' Grottoes

Set within one of the Yellow River's most dramatic gorges, Bingling Si is among the most evocative of China's Silk Road cave sanctuaries. Over 1,600 years, successive dynasties carved 183 grottoes into towering sandstone cliffs, filling them with more than 800 sculptures and extensive murals that chart the evolution of Buddhist art from the Western Qin through the Tang era and beyond.

The setting is as powerful as the carvings themselves. Pinnacles and ridges rise sharply above the river, their eroded forms lending the site an almost otherworldly grandeur. Since the creation of the Liujiaxia Reservoir, Bingling can only be reached by boat — a serene approach that heightens anticipation as the cliffs slowly come into view.

This relative isolation has preserved a rare sense of quiet reverence. Few visitors linger here, allowing time to absorb the expressive faces of the Buddhas, the faded pigments of ancient murals, and the sheer audacity of their creators. In contrast to busier cave complexes elsewhere, Bingling Si feels contemplative, intimate, and profoundly timeless.



Turpan, Xinjiang

Encircled by the scorched contours of the Flaming Mountains, Turpan is one of the Silk Road's most improbable survivors — an oasis town sustained by ingenuity as much as geography. Life here has long depended on the karez: an extraordinary subterranean network of hand-dug channels that draws meltwater from the distant Tianshan Mountains, cooling and irrigating the basin below. Lying some 30 metres beneath sea level, Turpan endures fierce summers, yet these ancient systems allow vineyards to flourish, producing grapes that are dried in distinctive mud-brick towers still used today.

Turpan's prosperity once supported powerful kingdoms, whose legacy endures in the haunting ruins of Jiaohe and Gaochang, abandoned cities rising starkly from the desert edge. Their artefacts — along with astonishingly preserved mummies and dinosaur fossils — are displayed in Turpan's excellent museum, providing vivid insights into both human and natural history. Together, these elements make Turpan one of the northern Silk Road's most compelling and revealing stops.



Kashgar, Xinjiang

Long a crossroads of trade and migration, Urumqi has evolved into the modern capital of Xinjiang — a purposeful city whose cultural depth is best revealed indoors and beyond its outskirts. The Xinjiang Regional Museum is a highlight of any visit, housing extraordinary archaeological finds, including naturally preserved mummies recovered from ancient Silk Road burial grounds, their textiles and features still remarkably intact.

Beyond the city lies a striking contrast. A short journey brings you to Tian Chi — 'Heaven Lake' — a serene alpine basin set amid snow-capped peaks, dark pine forests and flower-strewn meadows. In summer, Kazakh nomads graze their herds on nearby pastures, offering travellers the chance to stay in traditional yurts and share tea beneath wide mountain skies. Boat trips glide quietly across the lake's clear waters, reflecting glaciers and cloudbanks alike. Whether visited as a day excursion or overnight retreat, Heaven Lake offers a refreshing interlude of altitude, calm and pastoral life.



Urumqi & Heaven Lake, Xinjiang

At China's far western edge, where Silk Road routes once diverged and reunited around the Taklamakan Desert, Kashgar has been a meeting place of cultures for more than two thousand years. The city's enduring vitality is most vividly expressed at the Yekshenba Bazaar, held each Sunday, when traders, farmers and nomads converge with livestock, produce and goods from across the region. The air hums with bargaining as carpets, jade from Khotan, embroidered caps and finely worked knives from Yengisar change hands.

Kashgar's architectural landmarks speak to its spiritual heritage. The tiled mausoleum of Abakh Khoja, a revered 17th-century Sufi figure, stands in elegant contrast to the vast Id Kah Mosque, one of Central Asia's largest and still central to daily worship. Despite recent development, Kashgar retains a strong Uyghur identity, expressed in its food, language and rhythms of life — lending the city an atmosphere found nowhere else in China.



Exploring China

Vast, diverse, and endlessly fascinating, China offers experiences as varied as its landscapes – from the imperial grandeur of Beijing’s Forbidden City to the glittering skyline of Shanghai and the tranquil, classical gardens of Suzhou. Thanks to its superb high-speed rail network and frequent domestic flights, you can combine world-famous sights with lesser-known treasures in a single journey – perhaps the misty karst peaks of Guilin, the ethnic minority villages of Guizhou, or the serene lakes of Hangzhou.

Along the way, explore state-of-the-art museums, such as the Shanghai Museum and Xi’an’s Shaanxi History Museum, which bring to life the country’s rich artistic and cultural heritage. Those wishing to journey further afield might venture west to the ancient capitals of Xi’an and Luoyang, gateways to the legendary Silk Road, or south to Tibet and Yunnan’s dramatic mountain landscapes.

Whether your interests lie in UNESCO-listed treasures, cutting-edge modern cities, or timeless rural traditions, our specialists will craft an itinerary that blends China’s contrasts into an unforgettable adventure.

When to go

China’s sheer size brings great variety in climate, from tropical beaches in the south to snowy winters in the far north. Most regions experience cold winters and hot, humid summers. The ideal seasons for travel are spring (April–May) and autumn (September–October), when temperatures are comfortable, skies are clearer, and crowds are lighter.

Xinjiang’s desert regions are best visited from April to early June or from September to October, while Tibet and Yunnan’s high plateaux offer their best conditions between May and October. Our consultants will fine-tune your itinerary to match the seasons and ensure you experience each destination at its very best.

International Flights

British Airways operates direct flights from London Heathrow to Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, and Hong Kong. Other non-stop services from the UK include Air China (Beijing), China Eastern (Shanghai), and Hainan Airlines (Changsha). Many UK regional airports connect via European hubs with KLM, Air France, and others. Our team will recommend the most convenient and cost-effective options.

Travel within China

China’s high-speed rail network – the largest in the world – links major cities in comfort and at remarkable speed. Domestic flights are frequent and efficient, making even the farthest regions accessible. For shorter journeys, we use private, air-conditioned vehicles. Drivers rarely speak English, but you will be accompanied by an English-speaking guide who is highly knowledgeable about local history, culture, and etiquette, and who will act as your interpreter.

Cultural etiquette is important – greet with a nod or slight bow, accept items with both hands, and dress modestly when visiting temples and monasteries. Mandarin is the national language, though regional dialects abound; your guide ensures smooth communication. Road conditions are generally excellent, and our modern, well-maintained vehicles offer flexibility for photographers and those wishing to explore at a leisurely pace.



Accommodation

Accommodation in China ranges from luxurious city hotels to boutique guesthouses and traditional courtyard inns. In major destinations, you can expect world-class standards, attentive service, and a choice of styles to suit your taste.

In more remote regions, such as parts of Yunnan, Xinjiang, and Tibet, options are more limited, but we have identified the best available for comfort, cleanliness, and location. Many of these properties have distinctive local character – from Tibetan painted woodwork to Uyghur-inspired tilework.

Wherever possible, we recommend smaller, characterful hotels that reflect the culture of the region. Most properties are inspected by our teams to ensure they meet our high standards for comfort and safety, to enhance your journey and create a sense of place at every overnight stop.

Suggested Itinerary

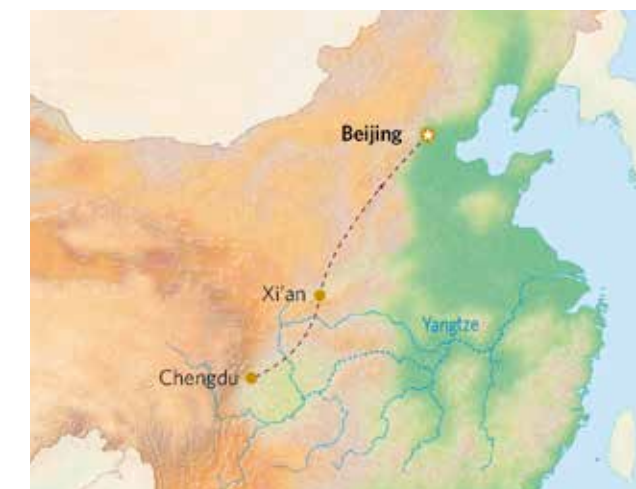
Our suggested itineraries here showcase the very best of China from its cultural heartlands, from Beijing, Xi’an, and Shanghai to Guilin, Hangzhou, and beyond to the storied Silk Road and the spiritual landscapes of the Tibetan plateau. All can be adjusted and tailored to meet your interests, from adding a beach break on Hainan Island to detours in Yunnan or the mountains of Sichuan. Whether you choose a classic route or a more adventurous path, our expert planning ensures a seamless, memorable journey, filled with the richness and diversity that make China one of the world’s most compelling destinations.

A Glimpse of China | 7 Days

A vast and immensely varied land, China defies simple definition.

It is a world of remarkable contrasts and a rich, endless diversity of scenery and ancient cultures. Our seven-day introduction distils the essentials into one beautifully paced journey. In Beijing, stroll through time on a walking tour of the hutongs, then step into imperial grandeur at the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven, culminating with a memorable visit to the iconic Great Wall. Board the high-speed rail to Xi’an to marvel at the Terracotta Warriors, cycle or walk atop the mighty City Walls, and sample street food in the lively Muslim Quarter before an evening Tang Dynasty performance. Continue to Chengdu, a relaxed city of tea houses and bamboo-shaded parks, where a morning at the Giant Panda Breeding Research Base brings you close to China’s most endearing resident. There’s time to wander Jinli Street, sip jasmine tea in People’s Park, or try a classic Sichuan hotpot. With seamless transfers, handpicked hotels and expert local guides, this trip can be tailored to your preferred pace, travel style and dates.

UK — Beijing — Xi’an — Chengdu — UK



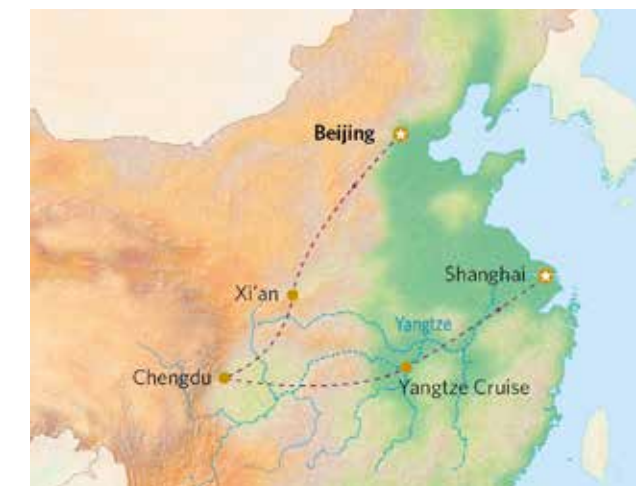
Essential China | 15 Days

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



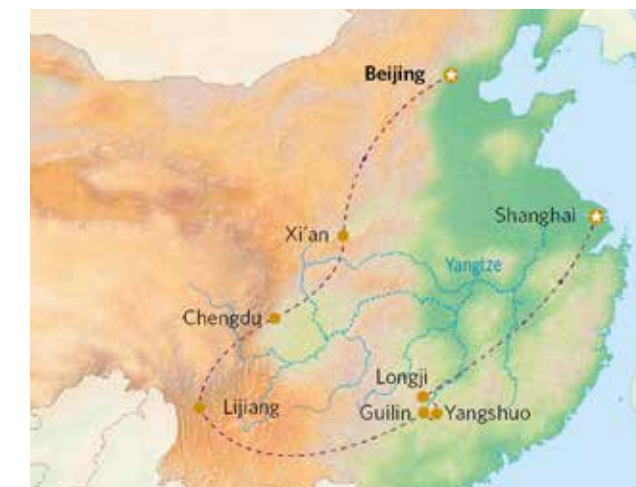
China Grand Tour | 20 Days

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 roofscape 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 spoiled 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



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

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

Minorities of Southwest China | 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

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

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

Yunnan & Tibet | 20 Days

A class apart, this truly unique tour takes you off the beaten track along the Old Tea-Horse Road. It traces a graceful arc from Yunnan's "City of Eternal Spring" to Tibet's sacred skyline.

In Kunming, camellias hem Green Lake and the Shilin stone forest rears like a frozen swell—to create an entrancing overture, while Dali, bathed in soft mountain light on the banks of the Erhai invites you to wander through whitewashed Bai hamlets and the Pagodas through narrow lanes scented with pine smoke and fresh-ground tea. Lijiang whispers with watercourses and carved balconies; Naxi melodies lace cobbles as Jade Dragon Snow Mountain glints between rooftops.

Higher still, Shangri-La opens to yak-grazed meadows and the gilded eaves of Songzanlin, prayer flags snapping in a clean, high wind. Beyond great lakes and passes, Gyantse rises with its magnificent Kumbum and hilltop dzong—an enduring crossroads of trade and devotion. Finally, Lhasa: the white stairways of the Potala, butter-lamp glow within the Jokhang, and the clockwise tide of pilgrims circling the Barkhor. Expect sweeping horizons and quiet, intimate moments—tea houses, monasteries, and the silence of the mountains.



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



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 Civilisation, 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.

See pages 105-107 for suggested itinerary options.

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. (Pg 76-79)

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. (Pg 82-83)

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. (Pg 82-83)

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. (Pg 81)

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! (Pg 92-93)

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. (Pg 91)

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. (Pg 86-87)

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. (Pg 98-99)

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						

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Tokyo

As the epicentre of the world's largest and most cutting-edge conurbation, Tokyo is where the nation's heart beats the 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.

See pages 105-107 for suggested itinerary options.



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 worshipers 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 district's 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.





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.



Grand Hyatt Tokyo

Grand Hyatt Tokyo delivers contemporary luxury in fashionable Roppongi, directly connected to Roppongi Hills and moments from Tokyo Midtown, museums and boutiques. Spread across 21 floors, the hotel pairs dark-wood elegance with light-filled spaces and a sense of roominess. Its 387 refined guestrooms—many with skyline views and deep soaking tubs—are complemented by a generous wellness floor, Nagomi Spa & Fitness, with pool, saunas and Japanese-inspired treatments. Seven destination restaurants and three bars range from pristine sushi and teppanyaki to a lively steakhouse and the late-night jazz lounge, Maduro. A polished Grand Club lounge and seamless service complete this cosmopolitan base.



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 confectionery, 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 flaky, 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.

JANU, Tokyo

A trinity of connection, inspiration & Exploration

Janu Tokyo, Aman's sociable sister brand, anchors the new Azabudai Hills district, moments from Roppongi and Tokyo Tower. Its Jean-Michel Gathy-designed 122 rooms and suites feel airy and calm, many with private balconies and floor-to-ceiling views. Eight dining venues range from sushi counters to an all-day grill, while a vast 4,000 sq m Wellness Centre spans multiple floors with a 25-metre pool, hydrotherapy and movement studios. The vibe is polished yet lively: a cosmopolitan base for art, shopping and contemporary galleries and nightlife. Families appreciate connecting options; design lovers the warm minimalism; everyone enjoys attentive service and seamless city connections. Some consider this to be the most fashionable and desirable address in Tokyo!





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.



Kamakura

An hour's train ride from Tokyo, Kamakura is a peaceful seaside town that makes a deeply rewarding day trip, where ocean air and ancient devotion meet beneath softly wooded hills. Along the pounding surf of Sagami Bay, lanes wind inland to reveal a remarkable concentration of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, many founded over 1,200 years ago, when Kamakura served as the seat of Japan's first shogunate. The most celebrated of these houses is the iconic 'Daibutsu', a monumental 121-tonne bronze Buddha cast in 1254, serenely seated beneath open skies. Wandering here feels like stepping into a gentler, more contemplative Japan, shaped by sea breezes and centuries of faith.

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.



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 Chūzenji Lake and through the forests of the surrounding national parks offer numerous possibilities of day hikes.



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 wash 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.



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.

See pages 105-107 for suggested itinerary options.



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.

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.

See pages 105-107 for suggested itinerary options.



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.



Nara

Nara ranks among Japan's most charismatic cities, home to a remarkable collection of ancient buildings, many over a thousand years old. Its UNESCO-listed jewel is the Todai-ji Temple, housing a 500-tonne, 16-metre bronze Daibutsu Buddha within the world's largest wooden building. The temple sits in a leafy park where tame sika deer wander freely. Once the easternmost arm of the Silk Road, Nara absorbed influences from India, China, Central Asia, and Persia, reflected in the treasures of the nearby museum. Foremost are the 7th-century artefacts of the Shoso-in Treasury, displayed briefly each autumn when conditions allow.



Himeji Castle

Regarded as Japan's finest surviving feudal castle, Himeji is a masterpiece of Samurai-era design. Its brilliant white walls and black-tiled, upswept roofs rise gracefully above the city, crowned by a six-storey central keep. Surrounding it is a complex of interlocking walls, baileys, moats, and Edo-style gardens, all laid out with ingenious defensive design. In spring, clouds of cherry blossom frame the fortress in a haze of pink, adding to its romantic allure. Inside, polished wooden interiors and latticed windows reveal displays of armour and weapons, bringing to life the castle's storied role in Japan's turbulent medieval past.



Osaka

Osaka blends Samurai heritage with a laid-back, welcoming spirit. Once a key stronghold in Japan's feudal era, its focal point is the grand Osaka Castle, encircled by serene moats and gardens. Beyond its historic heart, the city brims with character — from the neon dazzle of Dōtonbori to the covered arcades of Shinsaibashi. Here, food is a passion, with bustling eateries serving Takoyaki and okonomiyaki fresh from the griddle. Less formal than Tokyo or Kyoto, Osaka offers mature travellers an engaging mix of history, vibrant street life and genuine warmth, wrapped in a relaxed pace that invites you to linger.



Okayama

Okayama, a former castle town in western Honshu, is celebrated as the site of Koraku-en, one of Japan's 'Three Great Gardens'. First laid out in 1687, its landscaped grounds unfold in lawns, ponds, and meandering streams, framed by rockeries, azaleas, and blossoming fruit trees in spring. Stone pathways lead to viewpoints, teahouses, and the airy Ryuten rest house — a wall-free pavilion built over a stream that flows across carefully placed stepping stones. Tranquil yet meticulously designed, Koraku-en is a perfect expression of Japan's garden artistry, offering visitors a serene escape steeped in centuries-old horticultural tradition.

Hiroshima

At 8:15am on August 6th each year, silence falls in Hiroshima's National Peace Memorial, marking the moment in 1945 when the atomic bomb struck. Around 80,000 lives were lost instantly: tens of thousands more succumbed to injuries by year's end. The Peace Memorial Museum, near the epicentre, preserves haunting images and survivor testimonies, confronting visitors with the scale of the tragedy. Yet Hiroshima today is a thriving, modern city, rebuilt with extraordinary spirit. Standing here, one can't help but reflect on both the depths of human loss and the resilience, hope, and commitment to peace that rose from the ashes.



Nagasaki

Nagasaki's story is one of cultural crossroads and profound resilience. Once Japan's only open port during the Edo era, it absorbed influences from China, Portugal, and the Netherlands, reflected in its European-style churches, Chinese temples, and Dutch trading posts. In 1945, it became the second city devastated by an atomic bomb — a tragedy commemorated in the moving Peace Park and Atomic Bomb Museum. Yet Nagasaki has rebuilt with grace, its hillside streets overlooking a sheltered bay alive with history, markets, and warm hospitality. For the thoughtful traveller, it offers a rare mix of layered heritage, poignant remembrance, and enduring vitality.

Miyajima Island

The vermilion torii of Itsukushima Shrine, rising gracefully from the Seto Inland Sea, is among Japan's most iconic sights. Built from camphor wood and red lacquer, it marks the gateway to a revered Shinto complex framed by pagodas and forested slopes. Behind it, Mount Misen's summit offers sweeping ocean views, reached by cable car or forest trails through maple, cherry, and pine. A centuries-old decree protects every tree on the island, creating a living botanical sanctuary that blazes with crimson in autumn. Miyajima is not only visually spellbinding, but also deeply spiritual — a place in which nature and devotion blend seamlessly.





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.

See pages 105-107 for suggested itinerary options.



Nagano

Set amid the folds of the Japanese Alps, Nagano offers a compelling blend of mountain culture, spiritual heritage and refined flavours. Long renowned for its powder snow and crisp climate, the region is equally admired for its sake breweries, warming local cuisine and an emerging tradition of small-batch Japanese whisky. At its spiritual heart stands Zenko-ji, one of Japan's most revered temples, welcoming pilgrims for over fourteen centuries. Beyond the town, forested trails and highland landscapes invite gentle exploration, while secluded onsens provide restorative pauses. Whether sampling alpine-pure brews, strolling temple precincts or absorbing the calm of the mountains, Nagano rewards those who linger with a deep sense of place.



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 *The Great Wave off 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

Tucked into the quiet folds of the Yokoyu Valley, Shibu Onsen is a delightfully old-fashioned hot-spring town where time seems to slow. Narrow lanes wind between timber-fronted ryokan, their interiors warmed by mineral-rich waters drawn from deep natural springs. This is our preferred base for exploring the upper valley, not least for the comfort and character of its traditional inns, where attentive service, tatami-floored rooms and beautifully prepared kaiseki meals define the experience. Guests are encouraged to wander the village in cotton yukata, moving between historic bathhouses whose steaming pools soothe travel-weary limbs. In winter, snow hushes the streets and lanterns glow softly after dark, creating an atmosphere that is both deeply restful and unmistakably Japanese.



The Snow Monkeys of Jigokudani

In the early 1960s, Japanese macaques in the upper Yokoyu Valley discovered the pleasure of hot-spring bathing to survive the bitter winters. Their chosen pools, however, weren't ideal for human guests—so a dedicated monkey onsen was built at Jigokudani, where over 200 now gather, making them the region's star attraction. These pink-faced macaques live further north than any other non-human primate. Though their thick, grey-brown fur offers protection, winters remain harsh—hence their fondness for warm water. Visitors are captivated as juveniles swing from branches and plunge playfully into the steam, while older monkeys sit motionless in the pool, eyes closed, seemingly lost in thought, ignoring the chaos around them. It's an unforgettable glimpse into their world.



The Japan Alps

All but one of Japan's 30 highest peaks lie within the dramatic 'Japan Alps' of Central Honshu—a term coined in the 19th century by William Gowland, an English engineer and archaeologist. Gowland was the first foreigner to explore and scale the principal summits of the Hida, Kiso, and Akaishi ranges. These majestic, sawtoothed mountains now form the spectacular backdrop for skiing, snowboarding, and mountaineering. In warmer months, the region transforms into one of Japan's finest hiking areas, offering alpine flora, dramatic ridgelines, and sweeping views. A standout trail traces a stretch of the old Edo-era Nakasendo Road through the Kiso Valley, linking the beautifully preserved post towns of Tsumago and Magome. Winding past pine forests and waterwheels, this leisurely 2-3 hour walk is ideal for soaking up the timeless atmosphere of Japan's rural heartland.

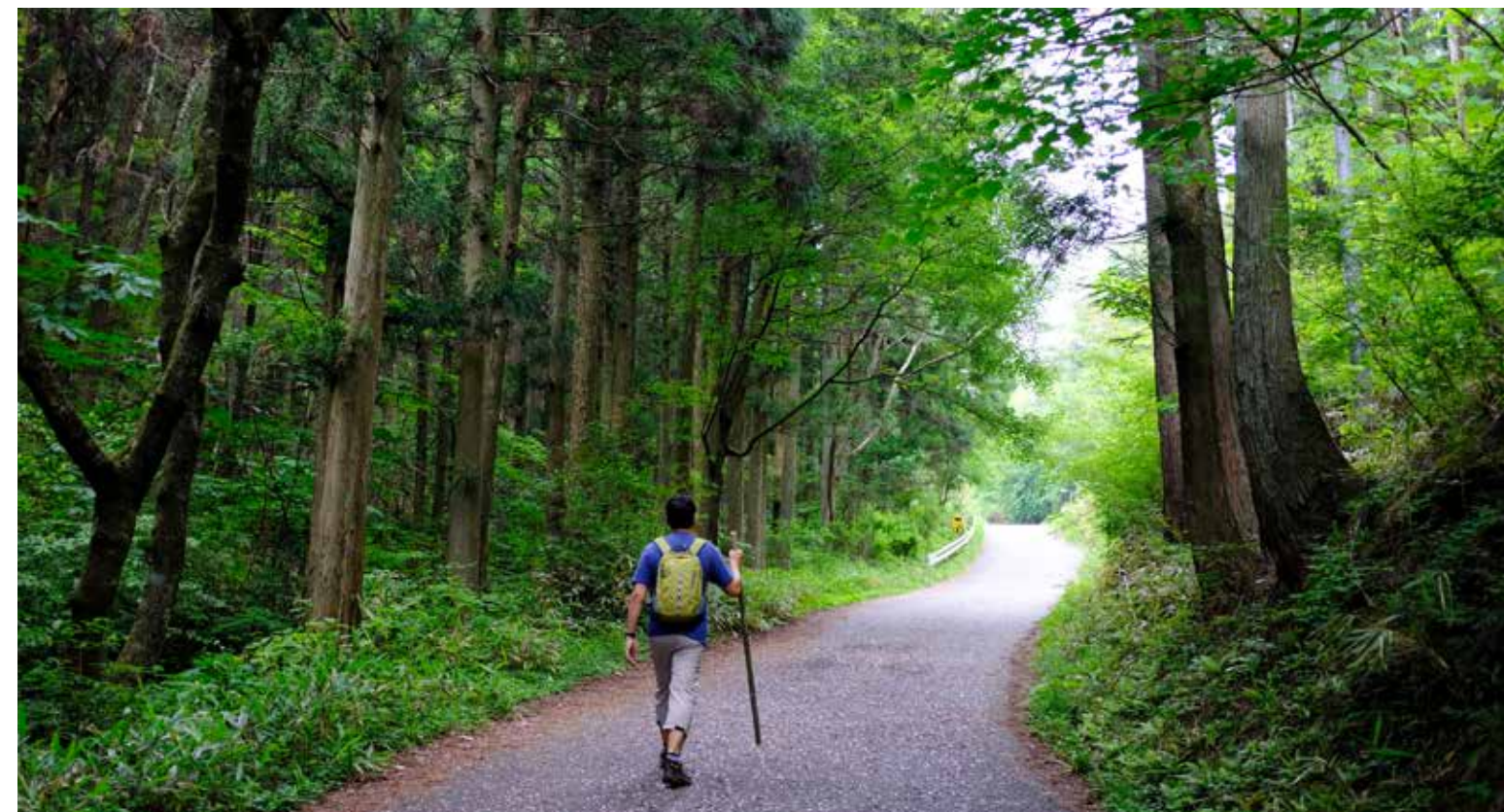
Shirakawa-go

Physically remote and culturally distinct, the thatched villages of Shirakawa-go have endured for centuries in a secluded valley above the Shogawa River in the Japanese Alps. Cut off from much of the country by deep snow in winter, villagers traditionally supported themselves by cultivating mulberry trees and producing fine silk. Their steeply pitched, A-frame houses—known as gassho-zukuri, or "hands in prayer"—were ingeniously designed to withstand heavy snowfalls while providing ample attic space for silkworm cultivation. Set amid terraced fields and forested slopes, the village exudes rustic charm and has been awarded UNESCO World Heritage status for its cultural significance and architectural ingenuity. A few of these historic homes now function as cosy minshuku (B&Bs), offering travellers the chance to experience traditional farmhouse hospitality, complete with seasonal meals, futon bedding, and the warmth of a hearthside evening.



Takayama

In a nation as modern as Japan, Takayama offers a rare step back in time. Its beautifully preserved old town, once a prosperous merchants' quarter, is lined with Edo-period buildings—some over 300 years old—now home to museums, craft galleries, and sake bars that retain their historic charm. Visitors can explore recreated interiors and exhibits of lion masks, mechanical puppets, and ornate floats used in the town's famous Shinto festivals, held each spring and autumn. Takayama is also renowned for its sake, brewed using pristine spring water from the surrounding mountains. In winter, the town's eight historic breweries open their doors for tastings, making January and February particularly rewarding times to visit. With its atmospheric streets, rich traditions, and alpine setting, Takayama captures the spirit of old Japan with remarkable grace.



The Nakasendo Way

Once part of a major Edo-period highway linking Kyoto and Tokyo, this historic trail winds through the central mountains of Honshu, offering one of Japan's most scenic and culturally rich walks. Spanning 534 km, the route threads together beautifully preserved post towns, where travellers can stay in traditional inns and savour hearty, farmhouse-style meals. The most picturesque of these is Tsumago, lovingly restored and free of modern distractions like power lines. Walkers pass through bamboo groves,

paddy fields, forested slopes, and old stone-paved sections, all with gentle gradients and occasional steeper climbs. Though the full journey takes 11 days, the popular Magome-Tsumago stretch can be enjoyed in a few hours. With its blend of natural beauty, timeworn charm and cultural depth, the trail is best explored in spring or autumn, when temperatures are mild and the landscapes at their most vivid.



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!





Japanese Cuisine: Nihon Ryori

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.

In Europe, restaurants typically serve a broad range of dishes. In contrast, in Japan, places tend to specialise in one particular type, 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 specialising 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 comprises 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. Bento 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!





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 tracts 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 Okhotsk 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.

See pages 105-107 for suggested itinerary options.



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-organised 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.

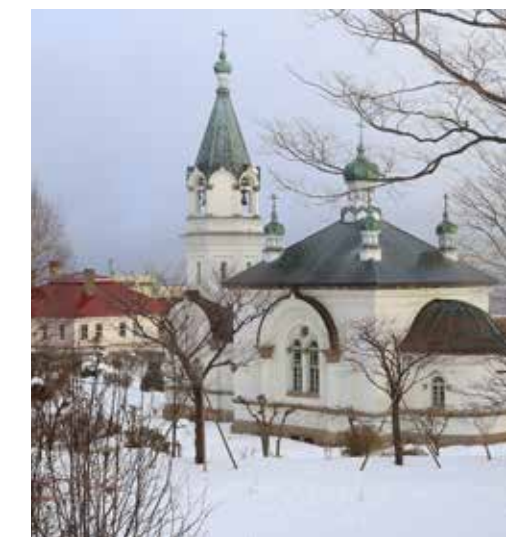
Odori Park plays host to several themed festivals through the year, ranging from a Munich-style 'beer fest' in the summer months (Japan's number-one brand is brewed locally) to 'autumn colours' in September, when the scarlet maples steal the show. The biggest crowds, however, descend for the famous Snow 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 Yokochi 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.





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.

See pages 105-107 for suggested itinerary options.



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.

See pages 105-107 for suggested itinerary options.



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 shoguns, 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.





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.



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.

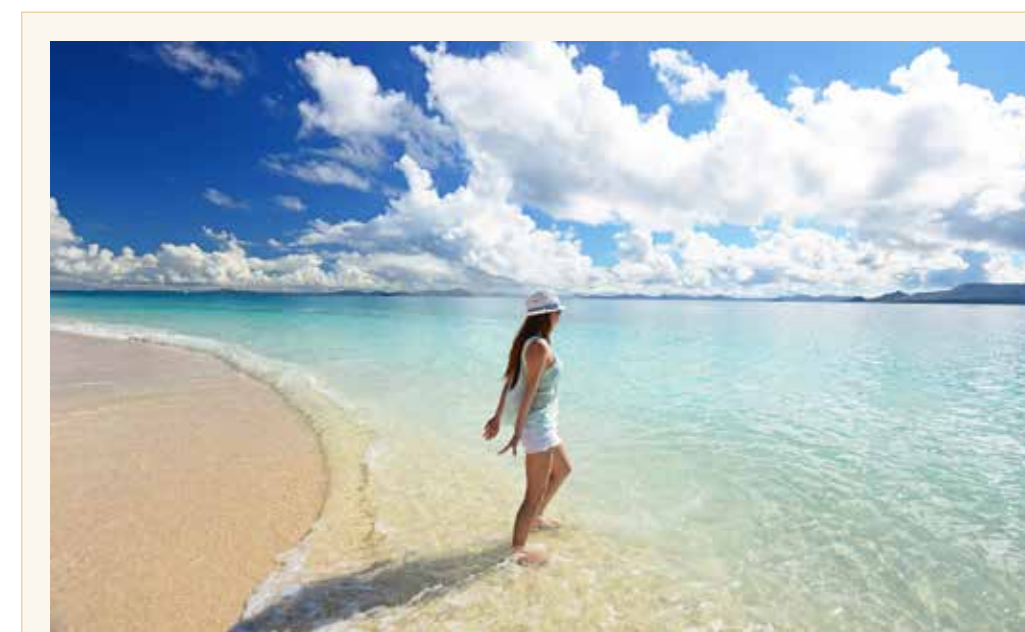


Okinawa's Secret

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.



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.

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.

Whether your interests lie in UNESCO-listed treasures, cutting-edge modern cities, or timeless rural traditions, our specialists will craft an itinerary that blends China's contrasts into an unforgettable adventure.

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).

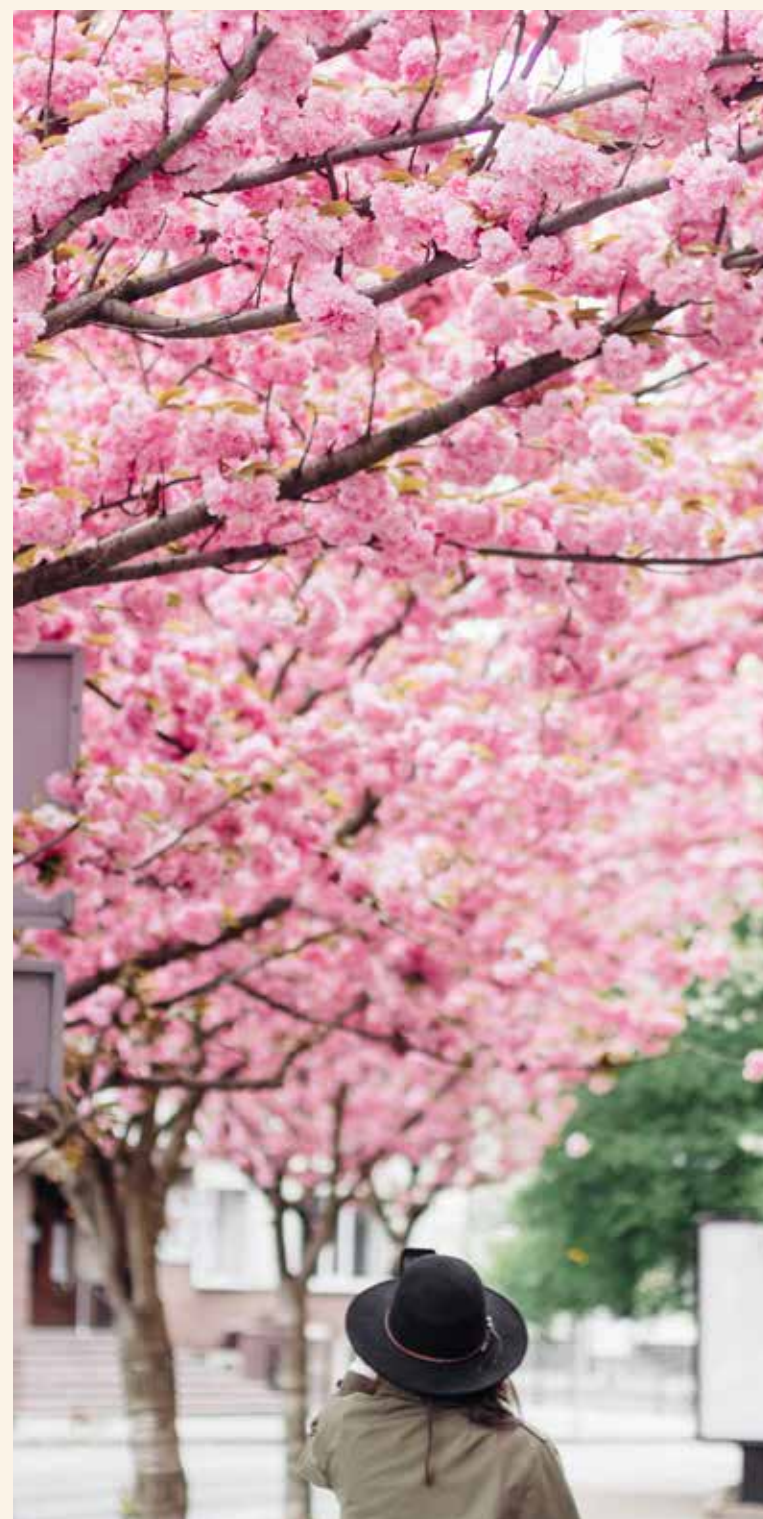
Travel within Japan

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 Itinerary

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.

Essential Japan | 9 Days

An introduction to Japan

Even today Japan symbolises the exotic, the unknown and the unfathomable, and exudes a sense of complete 'otherness' that draws visitors to its fascinating, volcanic shores. A wealth of World Heritage shrines, temples and gardens as well as modern Japan with its ultra efficient transport system and tall skyscrapers await discovery on this introductory tour. Start in the capital city Tokyo and explore the main sights of the city with your private guide. Spend a day in scenic Nikko, known for its ornate Toshogu Shrine. Take a rejuvenating soak in a hot spring at Hakone and then travel on to Kyoto, a fascinating city that echoes tales of a rich royal past. Remember, this trip can be personalised to suit your travel needs - we can tailor everything from hotel, travel type, duration and more.

UK — Tokyo (2 nights) — Nikko (1 night) — Mount Fuji excursion — Hakone (1 night) — Kyoto (2 nights) — UK



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



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



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

Wellness Tour of Japan | 14 Days

An adaptable journey through the serene landscapes of the Setouchi region

Even today Japan symbolises the exotic, the unknown and the unfathomable. Designed for those seeking a slower pace, this tour highlights the restorative side of Japan. Starting in Kyoto, absorb the city's meditative gardens and ancient temples. Visit Nara's friendly deer and great Buddha, then head to Kobe for its coastal views and famed cuisine. Explore the cultural heritage of Okayama, Hiroshima's poignant history, and Yamaguchi's traditional streets. Cruise to island towns such as Onomichi, taste citrus in Ehime, and enjoy Shikoku's peaceful scenery in Kagawa and Tokushima. With its blend of gentle travel, natural beauty and deep cultural traditions, this itinerary offers ample scope for spa visits, mindful walks and local encounters.



Remember, this trip can be personalised to suit your travel needs - we can tailor everything from hotels and travel type to duration and more.

UK - Kyoto - Nara - Kobe city - Hyogo - Okayama - Hiroshima - Yamaguchi - Onomichi - Ehime_Kagawa - Tokushima - Kyoto - UK

Flavours of the Far East | 14-days

A culinary journey through South Korea and Japan

This unique itinerary combines the flavours, aromas and traditions of two nations. Begin in Seoul with a guided food tour, tasting market snacks and Korean specialities. Learn to make kimchi, then fly to Japan for brewery visits in Yokohama and a tea ceremony in Tokyo. In Kyoto, share a meal with a maiko (trainee geisha) and sample sake. Explore Hakone for scenic beauty and Osaka for vibrant street food. Along the way, enjoy hands-on cooking classes, bustling food markets and exquisite fine dining. From street stalls to elegant kaiseki banquets, this trip celebrates culinary culture in all its forms - perfect for food lovers and adventurous eaters alike.



Remember, this trip can be personalised to suit your travel needs - we can tailor everything from hotels and travel type to duration and more.

UK - Seoul - Tokyo - Hakone - Kyoto - Nara - Osaka - UK

Japan's Mountains & Valleys | 15 Days

For travellers seeking Japan's dramatic landscapes and quiet trails

This route blends cultural highlights with some of Japan's most beautiful mountain scenery. Begin in Tokyo, then travel via Matsumoto's striking castle to Kamikochi, a remote alpine valley ringed by peaks. Continue to Takayama's old-town charm before immersing yourself in Kyoto's historic splendour. From there, venture to the Kii Peninsula to walk a section of the ancient Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trail, pausing at hot-spring villages and sacred shrines. This trip runs from April to November, when Kamikochi's trails are snow-free and the landscapes at their finest. Ideal for walkers, nature lovers and those wishing to go beyond the 'golden route'.



Remember, this trip can be personalised to suit your travel needs - we can tailor everything from hotels and travel type to duration and more.

UK - Tokyo - Matsumoto - Kamikochi - Takayama - Kyoto - Shirahama - Yunomine - Onsen - Nachi Taisha - Osaka - 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

Hokkaido: Land of Fire & Ice | 15 Days

An adventurous fly-drive through Hokkaido's untamed landscapes

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 forests - 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.

See pages 124-125 for suggested itinerary options.



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 by old relics, some delightful natural spaces and traditional teashops. (Pg 110-111)

Andong Hahoe | A bumper crop of traditional thatched Hanok manor houses survives, several converted into delightful guest houses, which you can use as bases for explorations of the area. (Pg 114)

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. (Pg 112-113)

Dosan Seowon | Set amid lotus ponds and bamboo forest, this wonderful specimen of 16th-century Confucian architecture, outside Hahoe, epitomizes the subtle grandeur of Korea's old world. (Pg 115)

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. (Pg 122-123)

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 galleries. (Pg 119)

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. (Pg 116)

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. (Pg116-117)

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	376	267	119	41	46	25
Best to travel	●	●	●	●●	●●	●●	●	●	●●	●●	●	●

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

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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. Today these cobbled streets are lined with designer boutiques and cafes.

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.

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.

See pages 124-125 for suggested itinerary options.



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 the 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

Sitting beneath Mount Namsan, Korea's most sacred peak, Gyeongju, the glittering capital of the Silla Dynasty during the Golden Age of Korea, was the seat of a kingdom that unified much of the peninsula and ruled for almost a thousand years between 57 BC and 935 AD. This remarkable era of prosperity produced an extraordinary flowering of art, architecture, and Buddhist culture. Today, the city is recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage treasure, with no fewer than four inscribed sites. Scattered across the valley and surrounding hills are the enduring legacies of the Silla kings: grand temples and grottoes, palatial gardens, royal tombs, and countless carved deities, alongside Queen Seondeok's elegant Cheomseongdae Observatory, the oldest of its kind in Asia. Together, these have earned Gyeongju the title of a "Museum without Walls." Gyeongju rewards unhurried exploration, revealing layer upon layer of history in a setting that feels contemplative, humane and profoundly enduring.

See pages 124-125 for suggested itinerary options.



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).



Seokguram Grotto

Further up Mount Tohamsan, reached along a shady forest path, lies the exquisite Seokguram Grotto, carved in the 8th century from white granite and now inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Its centrepiece is a seated Shakyamuni Buddha, serene and lifelike, enshrined on a lotus pedestal beneath a domed ceiling of perfectly fitted stone. Widely regarded as a masterpiece of Far Eastern Buddhist art, it remains breathtakingly moving and an unmissable part of any visit to Gyeongju.



Donggung Palace & Wolji Pond

Created in 674 AD, Donggung Palace and Wolji Pond formed part of Silla's royal precinct, hosting courtly banquets and moonlit entertainments. Pavilions once lined the water's edge, their reflections shimmering beneath lantern light during evening festivities. Archaeological excavations have yielded fine ceramics, metalwork and ornaments, many now displayed in the Gyeongju National Museum. Today, subtle night-time illumination restores something of the site's original enchantment, making it one of Gyeongju's most atmospheric historical spaces after dark where as many local friends and families gather as overseas travellers.



Tombs of the Silla Kings & Gyeongju National Museum

Scattered across Gyeongju's historic centre, the grass-covered burial mounds of the Silla kings speak quietly of immense wealth and power. Constructed without stone chambers, many tombs remain sealed, while those excavated have revealed extraordinary treasures, including gold crowns, jewelled ornaments, ceremonial weapons and ritual vessels. These masterpieces are displayed in the excellent Gyeongju National Museum, whose galleries vividly chart Silla's rise from kingdom to one of East Asia's most sophisticated early civilisations, famed for artistry.

Cultural Hubs of South Korea

Beyond its palaces and Buddhist monuments, South Korea's cultural soul is preserved in its Confucian academies, mountain shrines, and historic villages, many of them inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. These centers of tradition embody the ideals of harmony with nature, reverence for scholarship, and continuity of custom that shaped Korean society during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897). Rural settlements such as Andong Hahoe, Yangdong, and Jeonju showcase Korea's architectural legacy, where elegant tiled-roof manor houses stand beside humble

thatched cottages, enlivened by mask dances, festivals, and guesthouse stays. In the mountains, serene temples and shrines still welcome visitors, some offering immersive temple-stay programmes that reveal Korea's spiritual heritage through meditation, chanting, and communal meals. Equally atmospheric are the Confucian academies — Dosan, Oksan, Byeongsan, and Sosu Seowon — where timbered lecture halls and shrines preserve the quiet spirit of Joseon scholarship. Taken together, these hubs form a living window into the cultural heart of Korea's Golden Age.



Andong Hahoe Village

Tucked into a graceful curve of the Nakdong River, Hahoe Village is one of Korea's most atmospheric historic settlements and a UNESCO World Heritage Site celebrated for its well-preserved Joseon Dynasty architecture and social traditions. Founded around the 14th–15th century, it has been home to descendants of the Ryu clan for more than six centuries, with elegant tiled yangban manor houses standing beside simple thatched cottages still inhabited by locals. Visitors can stroll or cycle through its shaded lanes, explore the Hahoe Mask Museum's rich collection, and witness the vibrant byeolsingut talnori masked dance-drama, an Important Intangible Cultural Property of Korea. A night in a traditional guesthouse offers a rare taste of Korea's enduring Confucian heritage and village life.

Yangdong Village

Founded in the 15th century, Yangdong Village is Korea's largest preserved clan settlement, beautifully sited in a wooded valley near Gyeongju. The village blends aristocratic manor houses and humbler homes in a layout shaped by Confucian hierarchy. Visitors enjoy wandering past lotus ponds, pavilions, and traditional gardens, and can peek into still-inhabited hanok residences. Seasonal festivals and cultural demonstrations keep the spirit of Joseon life alive, while the surrounding countryside offers tranquil walking paths and fine rural views.



Jeonju

The main reason Koreans flock to Jeonju, the largest city in North Jeolla Province, is to experience the city's famous 'Hanok Village', a heritage quarter comprising around 800 period houses, temples and courtyard mansions. Dress up in an old-style Hanok costume and have your photos taken twirling in front of a beautiful antique gateway or shrine with upturned eaves, before retreating to one of a multitude of bibimbap restaurants for a bowl of fragrant local rice topped with sautéed vegetables, marinated beef and a fried egg sprinkled with sesame seeds and a dollop of a spicy sauce – the perfect restorative!



Oksan Seowon

Close to Gyeongju, Oksan Seowon was established in 1572 to commemorate Yi Eonjeok, a revered Neo-Confucian scholar. Its setting, beside a clear mountain stream and shaded by ancient pines, exemplifies the harmony of learning and nature. The academy preserves lecture halls, shrines, and libraries where generations of scholars once studied. Visitors can wander through its peaceful courtyards, admire the fine Joseon-era architecture, and reflect on the intellectual traditions that shaped Korea's cultural identity.



Dosan Seowon

Perched on a hillside overlooking the Nakdong River, Dosan Seowon was founded in 1574 to honour Yi Hwang, Korea's greatest Neo-Confucian thinker. Its elegant timber halls, lotus ponds, and stone gateways harmonise beautifully with the landscape, embodying Confucian ideals of simplicity and balance. Though no longer an active academy, Dosan remains a spiritual centre where traditional rituals are performed. Visitors can explore its lecture halls, shrines, and tranquil gardens, experiencing the quiet atmosphere of Joseon scholarship.



Byeongsan Seowon

Overlooking the Nakdong River near Andong, Byeongsan Seowon was founded in 1613 to honour scholar-official Ryu Seong-ryong, famed for his leadership during the Japanese and Chinese invasions. Its graceful wooden lecture halls and pavilions are arranged in harmony with the riverside landscape. Visitors enjoy tranquil courtyards, scholarly relics, and sweeping views that reflect the academy's Confucian ideals of balance, virtuous living and harmony with nature.



Sosu Seowon

Korea's oldest surviving Confucian academy, Sosu Seowon, was established in 1543 at Yeongju by the magistrate Ju Se-bung and later received a royal charter from King Myeongjong. Dedicated to Confucian learning and moral cultivation, it became the prototype for later seowon across the peninsula. Nestled in a wooded valley beside a clear stream, its modest lecture halls and ancestral shrines invite visitors to experience the intellectual roots of Korea's Neo-Confucian tradition in a serene, contemplative natural setting.

Mountain Shrines of South Korea

South Korea's mountain temples (Sansa) are spiritual havens that have preserved Buddhist traditions for over a millennium. Many are inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites and remain active centres of worship, offering visitors both cultural immersion and moments of serenity. Nestled in forested national parks or near historic cities, these shrines

combine natural beauty with profound heritage. Several also host Temple Stay programmes, allowing guests to experience meditation, chanting, and monastic life. Among the most accessible and rewarding for travellers are Haeinsa, Beopjusa, Geumsansa, Tongdosa, Songgwangsa Temple and Sinheungsa in Seoraksan National Park. Here are a few of our favourites...

Haeinsa

Nestled in Gayasan National Park, Haeinsa is one of Korea's Three Jewel Temples, representing the Dharma. Founded in 802 AD, it houses the priceless Tripitaka Koreana, 80,000 carved woodblocks of Buddhist scripture, recognised as a UNESCO Memory of the World. Its Janggyeong Panjeon library, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has safeguarded these texts for centuries. Just an hour from Daegu, Haeinsa welcomes visitors to explore its forested grounds and join immersive Temple Stay programmes, experiencing chanting, meditation, and monastic routines.



Geumsansa

Near Jeonju, Geumsansa dates back to the 6th century and flourished during the Unified Silla period. It is most famous for its enormous indoor Maitreya Buddha, housed in the three-story Mireukjeon Hall — the only wooden pagoda of its kind in Korea. The spacious temple grounds are filled with historic halls, stone pagodas, and tranquil gardens. Geumsansa also offers Temple Stay programmes, giving visitors the chance to participate in chanting, meditation, and temple meals alongside exploring nearby Jeonju Hanok Village.



Sinheungsa

Set in the dramatic landscapes of Seoraksan National Park in Gangwon Province, Sinheungsa is believed to be the oldest surviving Zen (Seon) monastery in the world, founded in the 7th century. The temple is famed for its monumental Bronze Jwabal (Great Buddha) and tranquil mountain setting, framed by forested hiking trails and soaring granite peaks. Easily accessible from Sokcho, Sinheungsa combines spiritual heritage with natural splendour, making it an inspiring highlight of Korea's northern mountains.

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.



Temple Stays South Korea

If wandering through the grounds of a sacred temple has ever stirred you, a temple stay will deepen that sense of wonder. For centuries, Koreans — and others across Asia — have retreated to monasteries for rest, reflection, and self-discovery under the maxim “자신을 찾아라” (“find yourself”). Today, these programmes are open to visitors from around the world, offering experiences that are as thought-provoking as they are restorative.

Temples are found both in bustling cities and deep within the countryside, often nestled against misty mountains and surrounded by serene gardens where birdsong mingles with the sound of temple bells. Some sites are so significant they are UNESCO World Heritage treasures. Wherever you go, the atmosphere is one of peace, harmony, and profound beauty.

A stay begins with orientation: guests are given simple temple clothing and introduced to etiquette — how to bow, walk mindfully, and respect the sacred spaces. Modest accommodation follows: plain rooms with floor bedding, often shared to encourage openness and community, though private rooms can sometimes be arranged. Meals are vegetarian and taken with the monks, often in silence, cultivating gratitude and reflection.

Days follow the gentle rhythm of monastic life. At dawn, drums and bells summon all beings to awaken. Mornings might include meditation, a meditative walk through the temple grounds, or sutra copying to focus the mind. Afternoons often bring cultural sessions — stringing prayer beads, joining a tea ceremony with a resident monk, or exploring the temple's treasures. Visitors may also lend a hand with chores such as sweeping, gardening, or preparing food, learning the value of mindfulness in simple acts.

Evenings are marked by solemn ceremonies in the main hall, with bows and chants honouring the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Later, under lantern-light, quiet reflection draws the day to a close before an early rest.

Most visitors stay one or two nights, long enough to glimpse this different rhythm and leave feeling lighter, calmer, and more centred. For overseas travellers, a temple stay often becomes the most memorable part of their Korean journey — a rare chance to step out of daily routines and into the timeless flow of Korea's living Buddhist traditions.





Busan

Korea's second-largest city has transformed from a historic port into one of Asia's most modern and fashionable metropolises. Today, it offers visitors an all-encompassing experience: ancient temples set against forested hills, dramatic coastal scenery, vibrant cultural events such as the world-famous Busan International Film Festival, and a thriving street-food scene that delights culinary travellers. Outdoor enthusiasts enjoy sweeping beaches, scenic hiking trails and coastal water sports, while art lovers encounter cutting-edge galleries and waterfront installations.

Traditional markets, contemporary cafés and historic neighbourhoods add further layers of character. Whether you seek heritage, relaxation or contemporary culture, Busan is an essential stop and with our specialist knowledge, we ensure you don't just visit Busan but truly experience it as locals cherish it: modern yet traditional, energetic yet serene, and always unforgettable. Here are our most memorable experiences.

See pages 124-125 for suggested itinerary options.



Gamcheon Culture Village

Perched on a hillside overlooking the harbour, Gamcheon is often called Korea's "Santorini." Once a modest refugee settlement, it has been reborn as a colourful maze of painted homes, art studios, and murals. Wandering its alleys is both a cultural and photographic delight, revealing Busan's creative spirit. We guide you through the hidden corners where the true spirit of the village lies, beyond the usual tourist paths.



Haeundae & Gwangalli Beaches

Busan's coastline boasts two of Asia's most celebrated beaches. Haeundae draws crowds with its golden sands, lively festivals, and cosmopolitan vibe, while Gwangalli offers a more relaxed atmosphere with stunning night views of the illuminated Gwangan Bridge. Both are ideal for swimming, strolling, or dining by the sea — experiences we seamlessly weave into your journey.



Spa Land, Shinsegae Centum City

For a quintessential Korean wellness experience, Spa Land is unrivalled. Located in the world's largest department store, this luxurious jjimjilbang offers themed saunas, hot springs, and relaxation spaces. It's the perfect antidote to a day of sightseeing, combining rejuvenation with local culture. With our guidance, you'll discover the rituals of Korean spa life in comfort and style.



Haedong Yonggungsa Temple

Unlike most mountain temples, Haedong Yonggungsa gazes directly over the sea, perched dramatically on rocky cliffs. Founded in 1376, it is one of Korea's most striking Buddhist shrines. Sunrise here is unforgettable, with chants mingling with the sound of waves. We ensure you experience its beauty in tranquillity, away from peak crowds, for a more meaningful visit.



South Korea on a Plate: Street Food & Markets

South Korea's culinary landscape is as diverse as its dramatic geography. Each region boasts signature dishes, vibrant markets and—at every table—kimchi, the fermented heartbeat of Korean cuisine. From the fish auctions of Busan to the tea fields of Boseong, gastronomy here is never far from the journey.

Seoul, the dynamic capital, is a natural starting point. Gwangjang Market is famed for mung-bean pancakes, hand-cut noodles and deeply satisfying bibimbap, while nearby Myeongdong's stalls tempt with tteokbokki and hotteok. Here you'll also encounter kimchi—the ubiquitous fermented side that brightens every table—appearing as crisp napa cabbage or cooling dongchimi, the perfect counterpoint to richer dishes. Evenings might bring a classic barbecue paired with soju, the clear local spirit commonly enjoyed with meals, and a shared basket of Korean fried chicken—a crunchy favourite with youngsters and visitors alike.

Further south, Jeonju, recognised by UNESCO as a “City of Gastronomy”, is celebrated as the birthplace of bibimbap. Its traditional hanok village brims with artisanal food stalls and small breweries producing makgeolli, the country's cloudy rice wine. Travellers can wander from house to house sampling regional variations, often paired with savoury pancakes.

Busan, Korea's second city and major port, offers an entirely different flavour. Jagalchi Fish Market is legendary for its array of freshly caught seafood. Here you can sample raw fish straight from the stall or indulge in a steaming hotpot by the harbour. The nearby Gukje Market, meanwhile, reflects the city's history with North Korean refugees, serving hearty comfort dishes such as milmyeon, a cold wheat noodle soup.

The southern provinces are particularly rich in culinary traditions. Gyeongju, the ancient Silla capital, is noted for its sesame cookies and delicate barley bread. Tongyeong, a seaside town, is famed for oysters, while Andong produces a slow-braised soy chicken (jjimdak) now popular nationwide.

No culinary journey would be complete without visiting Korea's tea and coffee heartlands. The misty slopes of Boseong in South Jeolla are carpeted with emerald-green tea plantations. Walking trails weave between the terraces, offering opportunities to pause for a cup of delicate green tea in a rustic pavilion. In Hadong, another historic tea region, centuries-old bushes still produce leaves used in Korea's most traditional brews. By contrast, Jeju Island has become synonymous with coffee. Its volcanic soil nurtures plantations where visitors can cycle between cafés, sampling single-origin beans in stylish spaces with sweeping ocean views.

Together, these culinary highlights can be woven seamlessly into a wider tour: morning hikes through rolling tea fields followed by a restorative brew; afternoons spent browsing vibrant city markets, and evenings sampling regional specialities in small family-run eateries. Beyond mere sustenance, South Korea's food and drink embody its history, geography, and contemporary creativity. For the traveller, this means not only memorable meals but also immersive cultural encounters at every step of the journey.





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 waterfalls and scenery too. While the casinos, golf courses and town beaches soak up the crowds, more curious travellers can take time to discover the amazing volcanic formations of the coastline in relative peace, or head through the citrus orchards lining the slopes of Korea's highest peak, to reach an ancient Buddhist temple at its peak. Udo, an islet off the northeastern shore, offers pristine, white-sand coral beaches lapping black-rock cliffs and divers and snorkelers, will love the Seogwipo city, on the south coast, which has the warmest seas in Korea and some superb coral reefs.

Regular scheduled flights connect to the island from Seoul and Busan daily and take roughly an hour, while Mokpo offers a daily ferry crossings at a more leisurely pace of 3-4 hours.

See pages 124-125 for suggested itinerary options.



Mount Hallasan

Jeju's volcanic crown rises dramatically to 6,397 ft/1,947m through the central forests, meadows and ancient lava domes of the island. Some well-maintained trails provide access to the crater lake, the rugged rim, and the ancient UNESCO-listed Gwaneumsa Temple at the peak, but do be prepared for changing weather conditions and equip yourself properly. For the less adventurous, the lower paths also offer panoramic island vistas and tranquil picnic spots among dwarf pines and birdsong.



Haenyeo Diving Show

Jeju's Haenyeo—formidable women free-divers—offer daily scheduled demonstrations of their UNESCO-listed tradition. The dive up to 20 meters deep without oxygen to harvest abalone, sea urchin and seaweed, surfacing to the signature whistle called *sumbisor*. Watch from shore, then visit a simple seafood shack to taste the day's catch. It's a rare window onto resilience, community and the island's matrifocal maritime culture.

Cheonjiyeon Waterfall

A serene cascade near Seogwipo, Cheonjiyeon tumbles into a jade pool, fringed by lush subtropical plants and dark volcanic rock, creating a calm, shaded haven. Boardwalks and gentle steps make it accessible at any pace; at dusk, soft lighting adds atmosphere and opportunities for evocative photographs. Combine the visit with a leisurely stroll along the river, listening for native frogs, then sample simple market snacks in town before returning to your hotel for a relaxed and unhurried evening.



Hamdeok Beach

One of Jeju's most photogenic bays, Hamdeok, pairs powder-white sand with glassy, turquoise blue shallow waters, ideal for families and cautious swimmers. The Boardwalk here links cafés and casual eateries where locals gather in the late afternoon to unwind and relax, as the light softens, and the bay turns glassy blue. You are invited to pause and mingle with local people amid gentle activity, sea air and lingering sunsets — an understated expression of Jeju's coastal rhythm.

Exploring South Korea

While comparatively few European travellers reach South Korea, it's one of Asia's most varied, welcoming and culturally fascinating destinations. Traditions of hospitality run deep; transport is first-rate; and a wealth of festivals, historic palaces and Confucian academies are easy to access. Much of the joy lies in the nature framing its vibrant cities—plus 22 national parks—and in off-beat gems: remote mountain temples, graceful hanok mansions and pretty farming hamlets. Centuries-old Buddhist monasteries still thrive, and temple-stay programmes welcome guests for some of the most restorative experiences anywhere.



When to go

Winters are very cold and dry; summers are hot and humid. The sweet spots are spring (April–early May) and autumn (September–October), bringing mild, sunny days, cherry blossom or fiery foliage. Expect daytime highs roughly 15–26°C in these seasons.

Visa Requirements

British citizens can visit visa-free for up to 90 days. South Korea's K-ETA is temporarily waived for UK nationals until 31 December 2025 (you may still apply if you wish to skip the arrival card). Always check for updates close to departure.

International Flights

Korean Air and Asiana Airlines operate non-stop services from London Heathrow (flight time about 12–13 hours). Virgin Atlantic has announced daily non-stops from 29 March 2026. Excellent one-stop options include KLM (via Amsterdam), Lufthansa (via Frankfurt/Munich), Turkish Airlines (via Istanbul), Qatar Airways (via Doha) and Emirates (via Dubai).

Travel within South Korea

In cities (and between nearby towns), you'll travel in a comfortable private vehicle with driver and English-speaking guide. For longer hops, we favour the fast, punctual KTX high-speed rail, with a domestic flight added where sensible—most commonly for Jeju Island.

Accommodation

Standards are high nationwide. Depending on your preferences, a typical TransIndus journey blends polished 4- and 5-star hotels with characterful, family-run hanok-style stays and B&Bs—ideal for a vivid window onto rural life.

Suggested Itinerary

Because most of our trips are tailor-made, the outline below is a springboard only. Many travellers add 2–3 days on Jeju for beaches and volcano-scapes, or detour south for mountain temples and coastal towns. The following pages showcase options our London-based specialists can weave into any two- or three-week trip with seamless logistics.

Essence of Korea | 8 Days

Royal palaces, Silla-era treasures and a vibrant maritime metropolis

Perfect for a first taste of South Korea, this eight-day journey balances headline sights with relaxed pacing and minimal hotel moves. Begin in Seoul, acclimatising amid grand royal palaces, superb museums and the tea houses and galleries of Insadong—perhaps adding a DMZ excursion. Glide south by KTX to Gyeongju, the former Silla capital, where grassy royal tombs, the elegant precincts of Bulguksa and the hillside sanctuary of Seokguram trace over a millennium of history. On Day 5, travel by private car to UNESCO-listed Yangdong Folk Village for a serene morning among aristocratic hanok, then continue door-to-door to Busan for sea air, street food and a restorative jjimjilbang. Return to the capital by high-speed rail for a contemporary dining send-off. In short: an essential sweep of Korea's culture, cuisine and coast—add 3–4 days for Jeju if time allows.

UK — Seoul (2nights) —Gyeongju (2 nights) — Private Car to Busan via Yangdong (2 nights) — KTX to Seoul (1 night) — UK



South Korea Explorer | 12 Days

Exotic Confucian monasteries, ancient archaeological 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



South Korea Active Explorer: Peaks, Palaces & Coastal Trails | 10 days

Designed for travellers who like to earn their views, this active journey stitches together Korea's great outdoors with headline culture.

In Seoul, stroll the grand palaces and a serene temple before an early excursion to the DMZ for context on the peninsula's divided history. Swap city streets for riverside bike paths along the Han, then lace up in Bukhansan National Park for a summit panorama. Speed east by KTX to Gangneung and continue to Sokcho for coastal cycling to Abai Village; hike Seoraksan's granite peaks the next day, with time for a contemplative temple visit. Trace the scenic coast to Gyeongju, heart of Unified Silla (668–935), for a relaxed city cycle among royal tumuli and lantern-lit ponds, plus a hike linking Bulguksa and Seokguram (UNESCO). Conclude in Busan with a cliffside walk on the Igidae Trail, seafood markets and a night cruise beneath the glittering Diamond Bridge, before the KTX whisks you back to Seoul.

UK - Seoul - Gangneung - Sokcho (Seoraksan) - Gyeongju- Busan - Seoul - UK



Flavours of South Korea – Culinary Journey | 12 days

Designed for travellers who like their culture served with flavour

Designed for travellers who like their culture served with flavour, this journey threads together lively markets, tea-clad hills and breezy coasts. Begin in Seoul, grazing Gwangjang Market and Myeongdong's stalls, with a nod to kimchi at barbecue—best with a splash of soju and a shared Korean fried chicken. Continue via Suwon and heritage-rich Andong for jjimdak, then settle into Jeonju's hanok lanes for bibimbap and makgeolli tastings. Drift south to the emerald terraces of Boseong for tea sessions; pause at Suncheon Bay and oyster-loving Tongyeong before the ocean energy of Busan—Jagalchi and Gukje markets by day, seaside cafés by night. Fly to Jeju for volcanic scenery, coastal cycles between roasteries and a final seafood supper. With private transfers, expert guiding where useful, and characterful stays, this is a delicious, unhurried introduction to Korea's regions—easy to tailor for more hiking, cycling or extra market time.

Seoul - Suwon - Andong - Jeonju - Boseong - Suncheon - Tongyeong - Busan - Jeju





Taiwan

If one journey could be said to distil the contradictions and joys of Taiwan, it's the short cable-car ride from Taipei into tea-clad hills. As the skyline of a pulsating city yields to fir tops and clouds, a quieter world of Buddhist and Taoist temples, ornamental gardens, and teahouses takes over. Seated on a stone-lined terrace, you can gaze through rifts in the mist towards the distant metropolis over sweet plums and cups of finest Oolong, poured from terracotta pots with bamboo handles. Beyond the country's high-tech facade lie landscapes, lavishly protected by a web of national parks and reserves that frame travel across the island, where you can admire the afterglow of sunset ripple across Sun Moon Lake, or cycle through the misty rolling tea-hills of Alishan; trace an eagle's arc high above the marble chasms of Taroko; and breathe the cedar-scented air of the Yushan range. If it's culture you seek, meet the indigenous communities keeping alive ancient weaving, woodcarving and harvesting skills, and browse some of the best art collections of the world among Taipei's galleries, studios and museums. Wellness and relaxation are never far, with world-class natural hot springs spas, and soft, white-sand beaches lining almost the entire coastline.

See page 145 for suggested itinerary options.



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. (Pg 141)

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. (Pg 129)

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. (Pg 133)

Kaohsiung | Taiwan's second city, remains popular for its maritime history as one of the world major ports. Vestiges of its glorious past endure in the old quarters of Zuoying and Yancheng. (Pg 139)

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. (Pg 138)

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. (Pg 135)

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. (Pg 141)

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. (Pg 142)

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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Taipei

Taipei city reveals itself through its neighbourhoods, inviting travellers to explore slowly and without agenda. Forested hills press close to the city, and it takes only moments to step from lively streets onto shaded paths, riverside walks or quiet temple courtyards where incense curls into the air. Along the Tamsui River, Tamsui Old Street hums with life, its food stalls, sea breezes and timeworn shopfronts recalling the city's long trading past. Nearby, Fort San Domingo and the old wharf speak softly of centuries of maritime exchange.

In the historic quarters, Dihua Street offers a richly textured glimpse into everyday heritage. Baroque façades shelter traditional Chinese medicine shops, tea merchants and dry-goods traders, their drawers of roots, herbs and powders still measured by hand. Small neighbourhood temples appear unexpectedly between shops and homes, their lanterns glowing at dusk, anchoring daily rituals of prayer and gratitude.

As evening falls, Taipei turns convivial. Night markets such as Shilin, Raohe and Ningxia spill into the streets, alive with sizzling woks, laughter and easy conversation. It is here, among shared tables and familiar faces, that Taipei feels most itself — generous, layered and quietly enchanting.

See page 145 for suggested itinerary options.



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.



New Taipei & Taiwan's North Coast



Tamsui Old Street & Fort San Domingo

Where the Tamsui River meets the sea, this lively waterfront town blends centuries of maritime history with an easy-going, holiday spirit. Old Street tempts with iron eggs, A-gei tofu and handmade pastries, while narrow lanes reveal arcades, craft shops and remnants of Tamsui's cosmopolitan trading past. Above it all rises Fort San Domingo, its red-brick walls recalling Spanish, Dutch and later British chapters in Taiwan's story. Visitors wander consular chambers, banyan-shaded gardens and terraces overlooking Guanyin Mountain. As sunset colours the estuary, musicians play, cafés spill onto promenades and Tamsui settles into its warm, unhurried evening rhythm.



Pingxi Lantern Festival

Held in the wooded hills of New Taipei, the Pingxi Lantern Festival transforms quiet mining towns into one of Taiwan's most poetic spectacles. Visitors inscribe rice-paper lanterns with wishes for health, love and good fortune, then release them skyward as night falls. Thousands of glowing orbs drift above the valley like floating constellations, illuminating stations, shrines and narrow streets filled with food stalls and brush-wielding calligraphers. Rooted in Hakka tradition, the festival carries a powerful sense of renewal and shared hope. Beyond the spectacle, the old railway line and mining relics offer a thoughtful glimpse into Taiwan's mountain heritage.



Raohe Night Market

Keelung's Raohe Night Market is a fragrant, lantern-lit celebration of Taiwan's street-food soul. Seafood dominates—crab broth simmered with ginger, grilled squid brushed with sweet soy, oysters crackling on hot griddles—yet visitors also find peanut-ice rolls, bubble tea and soft mochi desserts. The market's energy is joyful but never rushed; families queue patiently at favourite stalls, vendors greet regulars, and visitors wander with steaming bowls in hand. Set beside the harbour, Raohe blends maritime character with culinary tradition, offering travellers a vivid immersion into local flavours, everyday warmth and the convivial spirit of northern Taiwan after dark.



Houtong Cat Village

Nestled in a forested valley, Houtong has transformed from a thriving coal-mining town into Taiwan's much-loved "cat village." Well-cared-for felines wander freely along footpaths, rooftops and bridges, charming visitors who pause to photograph them or buy treats from cat-themed cafés and craft shops. Yet Houtong's mining heritage remains present in old conveyors, restored tunnels and riverside trails that hint at its industrious past. The blend of whimsy, history and nature gives the village a gentle, welcoming character. For travellers, Houtong offers a light-hearted yet meaningful stop—an encounter with community resilience and the quiet pleasures of small-town Taiwan.



Jiufen

Clinging to a misty mountainside above the Pacific, Jiufen is one of northern Taiwan's most evocative settlements. Once a thriving gold-mining town during the Japanese era, it now unfolds as a cascade of stone steps, teahouses and lantern-lit lanes. Jishan Street hums with local snacks — taro balls, fish-ball soup and mountain teas — while quieter backstreets reveal restored merchant houses, small shrines and glimpses of sea between tiled roofs. Pause at a historic teahouse to sip fragrant oolong as clouds drift across the hills. Jiufen rewards unhurried wandering, its atmosphere shaped as much by light and weather as by history.



Yehliu Geopark

Projecting boldly into the ocean, Yehliu Geopark is a dramatic meeting of land, sea and time. Wind and waves have sculpted its soft sandstone into fantastical forms — honeycombed ridges, mushroom rocks and the celebrated "Queen's Head." Boardwalks trace the shoreline, allowing easy exploration as light shifts across rock and water. Beyond the headland, fishing harbours offer glimpses of coastal life: nets drying, boats unloading, seafood sizzling nearby. Yehliu is both a scientific wonder and a visual poem, a place to reflect on nature's patience and power while absorbing the raw beauty of Taiwan's northern coast.



Keelung City

Sheltered by green hills and anchored by a deep natural harbour, Keelung is a port city shaped by weather, trade and resilience. Long a gateway for merchants and sailors, it retains a working character that feels refreshingly unpolished. Temples rise above markets, fishing boats return with the tide, and the waterfront hums with daily life. Above the city, historic forts from the Qing and Japanese periods recall strategic struggles for control of the coast. As evening falls, Keelung's renowned night markets come alive with pepper buns, crab soup and local sweets — a lively, authentic expression of harbour culture.



Heeping Island

Reached by a narrow causeway from Keelung, Heeping Island feels elemental and quietly dramatic. Here, wind and salt have shaped sandstone cliffs, wave-cut platforms and sculptural rock forms overlooking the Pacific. Coastal paths link viewpoints and small pavilions, revealing traces of 17th-century Spanish and Dutch fortifications that once guarded this strategic shore. In summer, sheltered tidal pools invite swimming; year-round, seabirds and surf provide a constant soundtrack. Less visited than nearby Yehliu, Heeping Island offers space to pause and absorb the meeting of geology, history and open sea — a calm counterpoint to the mainland's energy.



Central Taiwan

Central Taiwan unfurls like a quiet poem—mountains dissolving into cloud, plains shimmering toward the sea, and villages steeped in craftsmanship, ritual and kindness. It is a region best moved through slowly, allowing its textures to settle: the scent of bamboo groves after rain, the low hum of temple bells, the soft glow of tung blossoms drifting across green slopes.

At its centre lies Nantou, Taiwan's tranquil, landlocked soul. Here, Sun Moon Lake mirrors the sky in perfect stillness, and tea terraces lean into the wind as the land rises toward Jade Mountain's distant crown. Northward, Miaoli shelters the island's largest Hakka communities, whose artistry, woodcraft and spring blossoms lend the region a gentle luminosity. To the south, Taichung pulses with creative light—its galleries, leafy boulevards and museum districts forming one of Taiwan's most graceful cultural hubs. Across Changhua's fertile plains, pilgrimage routes wind through temple towns like Lukang, where history lingers in carved beams and lantern-lit courtyards. Further west, Yunlin's farmlands reveal a slower, earth-rooted world of puppeteers, soy brewers and scenic coffee hills.

Mild in climate and easily reached by high-speed rail, Central Taiwan invites travellers to wander, linger and rediscover the quiet beauty of moving gently through a landscape shaped by heritage and heart.

See page 145 for suggested itinerary options.



Sun Moon Lake

Sun Moon Lake shimmers in hues of jade and silver, its twin shapes embraced by forested mountains. Cycling paths trace the water's edge, passing pagodas, teahouses and cedar groves, while boats glide across misty morning reflections. Lakeside trails lead to quiet shrines and Indigenous cultural centres honouring the Thao people, whose stories root the landscape. Sun Moon Lake is a sanctuary of slow movement, shifting light and gentle mountain calm.

Hehuanshan

High in the Central Mountain Range, Hehuanshan offers alpine meadows, cloud seas and skies bright with stars. Walkers follow soft summit trails as breezes sweep across grassy ridges. From here, travellers can descend eastward into Hualien and onward to Taroko Gorge, making Hehuanshan a poetic threshold between landscapes. Crisp air, silent horizons and rose-gold sunsets make this highland retreat deeply restorative.



The Tea Culture of Nantou

In Nantou's misty highlands, tea culture unfolds in beautifully varied layers. **Lugu** is the spiritual heart, its villages steeped in centuries of craftsmanship. Nearby **Dong Ding**, with its cool mid-altitude slopes, produces Taiwan's most iconic Oolong—rich, roasted and honeyed. Higher still, the forests of Shanlinxi yield ethereal High Mountain teas, prized for their floral clarity and fresh, alpine sweetness. Together, these hills form a landscape.



Puli & Taomi Eco-Villages - Nantou County

Encircled by mountains, Puli blends clear springs, bamboo groves and an elegant mix of red-brick shophouses, Japanese-era villas and temples adorned with carved dragons. Just beyond town, the striking Chung Tai Chan Monastery rises in sculptural stone and bronze, offering serene halls and mountain views. Nearby, Taomi Eco-Village—rebuilt after the 1999 earthquake—nurtures wetlands, butterfly gardens and solar-roofed homes. Travellers wander bamboo-scented trails, join handmade paper workshops and discover a landscape shaped by creativity, resilience and quiet rural grace.

Hotel Fleur de Chine Sun Moon Lake

Set on the tranquil north shore of Sun Moon Lake, Fleur de Chine is Nantou's most refined lakeside retreat. Spacious rooms and suites open onto balconies with shimmering water views, while Michelin-trained chefs preside over a choice of accomplished restaurants. An open-air amphitheatre hosts evening cultural performances beneath the stars. Days are filled with paddle boarding, cycling lakeside trails, forest walks and private yacht cruises, before returning to deep stillness, impeccable service and mountain-framed calm.





Lukang Old Town

Lukang is a town shaped by tide and time—once a thriving 18th-century port, now one of Taiwan's most atmospheric heritage enclaves. Narrow alleys lead past latticed windows, red-brick courtyards and artisan workshops where traditions echo softly. Within this labyrinth lie treasures: **Kinmen Hall**, an elegant merchant residence; **Wende Temple**, honouring the God of Literature; and the magnificent **Longshan Temple**, carved with dragons, auspicious beasts and stories of devotion. Lantern-shaded arcades shelter pastry shops and incense stalls, while quiet corners reveal glimpses of a Taiwan long gone. Lukang is history rendered intimate.



Baguashan Great Buddha

Rising above the plains of Changhua, the **Baguashan Great Buddha** gazes serenely across fields, temples and distant mountains, as if holding the region's stories in quiet compassion. The hillside park unfolds in soft terraces and shaded pathways, where pilgrims pause beneath banyan trees and incense drifts on the breeze. At sunset, the bronze statue glows with a gentle radiance, its calm presence mirrored by lantern-lit ponds and the hum of evening prayers from nearby shrines. Walking here feels like stepping into a living mandala—part spiritual sanctuary, part viewpoint over the fertile heart of central Taiwan.



Taichung City

Taichung is Central Taiwan's creative heart, a city of wide boulevards, leafy parks and elegant contemporary architecture. Its landmark arts complex hosts dance, opera and imaginative performances, while nearby galleries and sculpture gardens glow with changing exhibitions. Japanese-era streets blend with stylish cafés, design studios and bookshops, creating a gentle cultural rhythm. Evenings unfold in lively night markets such as **Fengjia**, and chic shopping districts offer a refined, cosmopolitan edge to this inviting, warm-spirited city.



National Taichung Theater

Designed by Toyo Ito and opened in 2014, the National Taichung Theater rises like a sculpture of light, its flowing "sound caves" inspired by the movement of breath. Within these curving halls, Taiwan's performing-arts heritage—from temple rites to folk opera and puppetry—finds a modern stage. Daily performances span dance, opera and experimental theatre, while guided tours, art installations and regular workshops invite deeper explorations. Linger in its soaring atriums, where architecture and imagination merge in a living ode to creativity.



Lukang Longshan Temple

Among Taiwan's finest expressions of Qing-era temple architecture, Lukang Longshan Temple is a place of remarkable calm and craftsmanship. Dedicated to Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, its elegant courtyards unfold beneath sweeping swallow-tail roofs supported by finely carved stone pillars. Painted beams, latticework ceilings and guardian figures reveal the skill of master artisans, while ancient banyan and bodhi trees cast cooling shade across prayer halls and lotus ponds. Incense coils drift gently through the complex, softening the air with ritual and reverence. Both spiritual sanctuary and cultural landmark, Longshan Temple offers an intimate encounter with Taiwan's artistic and devotional traditions at their most refined.



Hakka Culture in Miaoli

Miaoli lies at the cultural heart of Taiwan's Hakka communities, where tradition remains woven into everyday life. In hillside towns such as Nanzhuang and Sanyi, ancestral halls, brick courtyards and tiled roofs speak of generations shaped by migration and resilience. Visitors are welcomed with lei-cha tea, ground with herbs and grains, and encounters with living crafts including indigo dyeing, woodcarving and handwoven textiles. In spring, tung blossoms drift across the hills like snowfall, lending the landscape a quiet poetry. In Miaoli, Hakka culture is not preserved behind glass; it is shared warmly, through food, craft and seasonal ritual.



Sanyi Wood Sculpture Village

Set amid gentle hills and forested slopes, Sanyi is renowned as Taiwan's centre of wood sculpture, a tradition that flourished here from the early twentieth century. Local artisans began carving camphor wood into temple ornaments, deities and guardian figures, drawn by the material's fragrance and resilience. Today, workshops and galleries line the village, displaying works that range from classical religious forms to contemporary interpretations. Visitors may watch master carvers at work, their tools guided by grain and intuition, or try their hand in introductory classes. In Sanyi, art feels deeply rooted — shaped by landscape, tradition and the quiet discipline of craft.



Huwei Township

Set within fertile plains shaped by rivers and railways, Huwei Township offers a quietly evocative portrait of Yunlin's rural past. Japanese-era architecture lines its streets: wooden dormitories, tiled workshops and former sugar-industry offices recalling a time of measured rhythms and skilled labour. The historic Huwei Sugar Factory anchors the town, its orderly structures softened by trees and late-afternoon light. Nearby, the Puppet Theatre Museum adds colour and narrative to local traditions. Wandering Huwei feels unhurried and intimate — a place to explore heritage buildings, sip local coffee and sense how memory, craft and everyday life remain gently intertwined.



Beigang Chaotian Temple

Founded in 1694, Beigang Chaotian Temple stands among Taiwan's most revered centres of Mazu worship, honouring the sea goddess long trusted by sailors and coastal communities. Entering the complex, visitors are enveloped by ritual and artistry: incense coils rise slowly, drums pulse across courtyards, and intricately carved dragons animate sweeping rooflines. The craftsmanship is exuberant yet purposeful, shaped by generations of devotion. Each spring, Mazu's birthday pilgrimage transforms Beigang into a river of colour, sound and movement. More than a historic monument, Chaotian Temple remains a living spiritual heart, expressing the enduring bond between faith, ritual and Taiwan's maritime identity.



Gukeng Coffee Hills

Rising gently above Yunlin's lowlands, the Gukeng Coffee Hills are scented with morning mist, forest air and freshly roasted beans. Coffee was introduced here during the Japanese era, and today, small farms produce some of Taiwan's most distinctive Arabica, prized for its soft acidity, caramel sweetness, and floral notes. Visitors wander between orchards, drying racks and roasting sheds, pausing at hillside cafés overlooking drifting valley clouds. Much of Gukeng's coffee is enjoyed within Taiwan, lending it an intimate, local character. Rooted in landscape and patient labour, the experience offers a slow, aromatic introduction to Taiwan's lesser-known but much coffee culture - a prized secret the Taiwanese have kept hidden!



Southern Taiwan

Southern Taiwan reveals the island at its most generous and open-hearted, a region shaped by sunlight, sea air and an unhurried rhythm of life. Winters are mild and bright, while much of the year unfolds beneath vast subtropical skies, inviting travellers to slow down and savour journeys guided by warmth, colour and coastal light.

The cities tell layered stories. Kaohsiung's harbourfront boulevards and lively temple quarters reflect its maritime past and confident modern renewal, while Tainan — Taiwan's oldest city — charms with intimate lanes, historic residences and venerable shrines shaped by Dutch, Chinese and Japanese influence. Inland, forested mountains rise toward mist-softened ridges, where Indigenous Bunun and Rukai communities sustain traditions expressed through music, craft and seasonal ceremony.

Further south, the landscape opens into coral-fringed bays and sunlit beaches. Kenting National Park stretches across wind-shaped headlands, tropical forests and clear waters ideal for snorkelling, diving and relaxed coastal exploration. Quiet fishing villages, lighthouses and scenic roads trace the shoreline, revealing sweeping Pacific horizons.

Easily reached by high-speed rail and explored at a gentle pace, Southern Taiwan rewards curiosity with warmth, authenticity and a lasting sense of ease.

See page 145 for suggested itinerary options.



Anping Fort & Anping Old Street

In **Anping**, sea breezes carry stories of Dutch traders, Qing-era soldiers and centuries of maritime exchange. The red-brick **Anping Fort** crowns the district, offering views across salt-washed rooftops and winding alleys. Below it, **Anping Old Street** hums with tradition: oyster omelettes, artisanal snacks, lacquerware shops and evening bazaars filled with local chatter. With its blend of history, food and harbour air, Anping remains one of Taiwan's most atmospheric gateways to the past.

Tainan

Tainan is the cradle of Taiwanese civilisation, where four centuries of history linger in quiet lanes and courtyards. The oldest of Taiwan's cities, it dates back to Dutch and Qing rule, and unfolds like a gentle tapestry of temples, alleyways and sunlit parks. Lantern-lit lanes such as Lane 227 Yongfu Road and whimsical Snail Alley reveal quiet courtyards, teahouses and artisans at work. Historic forts, elegant Japanese-era buildings and leafy boulevards guide travellers toward markets alive with fragrance and colour. Even the Tropic of Cancer brushes this storied region, lending its warm, languid rhythm to a city steeped in memory, ritual & charm.



Tainan God of War Taoist Temple

Dedicated to **Guan Gong**, the God of War and protector of loyalty and righteousness, this atmospheric temple radiates centuries of devotion. Carved beams, swirling dragons and crimson lanterns frame courtyards scented with sandalwood. Scholars and students once prayed here for wisdom and moral clarity, a tradition that continues beneath its flickering lamps. The temple's serene halls invite travellers to pause, reflect, and step into the timeless rhythm of Tainan's spiritual life.



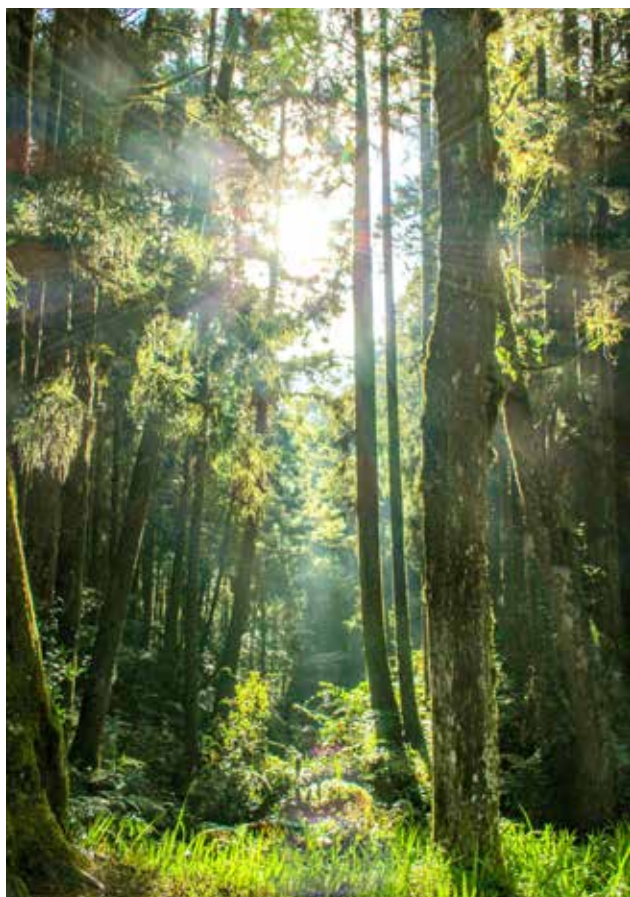
Taijiang National Park

A shimmering mosaic of lagoons, wetlands and drifting light, **Taijiang National Park** protects Taiwan's most poetic coastal landscapes. Birdwatchers come for migratory black-faced spoonbills, while walkers trace boardwalks through salt flats and quiet reed beds. The famed **Sicao Green Tunnel**, a peaceful mangrove waterway, shelters kingfishers and herons, and nearby villages reveal centuries of oyster farming. Taijiang is a haven of ecology, culture and slow, contemplative movement.



Hayashi Department Store

A beloved icon of 1930s Taiwan, Hayashi Department Store rises gracefully above Tainan's old streets, blending Japanese elegance with contemporary style. Restored wooden interiors house boutiques showcasing local crafts, ceramics, textiles and delicate homeware, while exhibitions honour the building's cultural past. The rooftop — crowned by its historic Shinto shrine — now hosts a charming café with city views. Hayashi remains a sanctuary of nostalgia, craftsmanship and refined urban culture in Taiwan's oldest city.



Alishan Recreational Area

For travellers, Alishan is an invitation to slow down and slip into the rhythm of Taiwan's high mountains. At dawn, seas of cloud drift between cedar-clad peaks as walkers follow mossy boardwalks into forests alive with birdsong, ancient cypress and soft shafts of mountain light. The historic Alishan Forest Railway carries visitors through bamboo valleys to the quaint villages of Fenqihu and Doolin, where wooden teahouses, old streets and forest trails encourage wandering, tasting and unhurried discovery.

Terraced tea and coffee plantations shimmer across the slopes—Dong Ding Oolong gardens, high-mountain tea estates and family-run coffee farms where guests can hand-pick leaves, meet growers, join roasting or tasting sessions and savour cups fragrant with floral, creamy or honeyed notes.

In these highlands, the Hakka and Tsou peoples share weaving, woodcraft, food traditions and stories rooted deeply in the land. Whether cycling the ridgelines, strolling to shrines, or pausing in cloud-kissed viewpoints, visitors find that Alishan is not merely a place to see, but a landscape to breathe, taste and be gently transformed by.



Kaohsiung City

In Kaohsiung, tropical breezes and wide boulevards lead to the shimmering Lotus Pond, where colourful temples rise beside lotus blooms. The iconic Dragon and Tiger Pagodas invite travellers to “enter through the dragon, exit through the tiger” for good fortune, while the graceful Spring and Autumn Pavilions reflect in jade-green waters. Around them, parks, promenades and vibrant night markets reveal the open-hearted spirit of Taiwan's southern port city.



Fo Guang Shan

One of Asia's largest Buddhist centres, Fo Guang Shan monastery, temple and museum is a vast complex of golden stupas, serene courtyards and sweeping colonnades. Its Buddha Museum holds a revered tooth relic and galleries illuminating Buddhist art and thought. Visitors wander meditation paths, sip tea in quiet gardens, and join guided tours that reveal the monastery's message of compassion and harmony. A day here unfolds slowly, offering peace, reflection and majestic Himalayan-inspired architecture.



Maolin Hot Springs

Hidden in Maolin's deep valleys, these hot springs bubble beside forested slopes and turquoise rivers. Butterflies drift through warm air, especially during the famed Purple Crow season, while steam rises gently from rock pools. Travellers soak beneath bamboo groves, follow trails to waterfalls, and encounter the calm rhythms of the Rukai homeland. Maolin's springs feel timeless — a soothing, elemental retreat shaped by mountain light and quiet Indigenous landscapes.



Kenting National Park

At Taiwan's southern tip, Kenting National Park unfolds in dazzling blues and golds — coral-sand beaches, warm currents and rugged limestone headlands shaped by wind and time. Snorkellers discover gardens of living coral, while divers explore caverns lit by shifting light. Surfers chase Pacific swells along open bays, and quiet coves invite gentle swimming. Standing sentinel above the sea, the Eluanbi Lighthouse guides ships past Taiwan's edge, its white tower glowing against tropical skies. With palms, breezes and radiant water, Kenting is the island's sunlit frontier of freedom and adventure.



Taitung City & Rift Valley

Taitung carries a quiet, sunlit energy — part archaeological heartland, part creative sanctuary. At the **National Museum of Prehistory** and the **Beinan Site**, Taiwan's megalithic culture emerges from grassy plains, while lantern-lit evenings at **Tiehua Music Village** showcase Indigenous musicians and storytellers. The East Rift Valley reveals tea terraces, rice fields and cycling trails stretching to the horizon, while **Luye Highland** hosts Taiwan's hot-air balloon festival. Pines and lakes frame the **Taitung Forest Park**, and temple life animates both city and countryside. Southward lie **Jhihben's hot springs**, a valley of mineral pools and Indigenous cuisine shaped by forest ingredients and mountain tradition.

Hualien

Hualien blends artistic reinvention with the raw beauty of the Pacific. In the city, Japanese-era sake warehouses have become cafés and galleries at the **Cultural & Creative Industries Park**, while the **Stone Sculpture Museum** reveals a craft shaped by the region's geology. Evenings gather at **Dongdamen Night Market**, where Indigenous and Hakka flavours meet coastal street life. Beyond town lie the shingle arcs of **Qixingtang**, the lakeside paths of **Liyu Lake**, and the jade-green pools of **Mukumugi Valley**. Nearby Indigenous villages in Shoufeng and Fenglin offer gentle encounters with music, crafts and seasonal rituals rooted in the rhythms of mountain and sea.



Highway 11

Highway 11 unspools along one of Asia's most arresting coastlines — a narrow ribbon between surf and mountains. Fishing hamlets, **Amis communities**, and laid-back surf towns punctuate the route, each with its own rhythm and flavours. At **Xiaoyehliu**, tide-sculpted rocks create miniature stone labyrinths; at **Sanxiantai**, a wave-shaped bridge leads to offshore islets where volcanic forms meet sea light. The artist village of **Dulan**, housed in an old sugar mill, offers studios, music nights and Indigenous craft. Offshore, **Green Island** and **Orchid Island** hover on the horizon. The journey is as much about culture as it is about scenery.

Taroko Gorge

Taroko Gorge is Eastern Taiwan's great geological epic — a 19-kilometre marble canyon carved by the Liwu River into soaring, silver-veined walls. Travellers explore cliffside trails such as **Shakadang**, **Baiyang**, and the dramatic **Tunnel of Nine Turns**, where water roars through turquoise pools below. Shrines like the **Eternal Spring Shrine** and quiet hilltop temples offer spiritual anchorage amid the cliffs, while rope bridges, grottoes and waterfalls add layers of adventure. Wildlife flourishes in the forested folds of the national park, accessible through gentle walks or guided hikes. Taroko is a place where stone, water and stillness create an unforgettable sense of wonder.

Eastern Taiwan

Eastern Taiwan feels like a world apart — a long, luminous corridor where the Pacific presses against mountains that rise almost from the sea. For centuries, these landscapes remained isolated from the island's western plains, protected by sheer cliffs and deep river gorges. Here, Indigenous communities such as the **Amis**, **Bunun**, **Truku** and **Puyuma** sustained rich coastal and highland cultures, shaping the region's identity long before Chinese settlers arrived in the late Qing and Japanese administrators carved roads and railways through the mountains.

Today, the east still holds that sense of spaciousness and cultural depth. Pine forests sway beside quiet towns, valleys open into rice fields stitched with tea gardens, and fishing villages rest in the shadow of volcanic headlands. Archaeological sites reveal Taiwan's earliest civilisations; music villages glow with lanterns; art spaces flourish in converted stations and old breweries.

Beyond its cultural warmth, Eastern Taiwan offers some of the island's most striking natural drama — a coastline of shingle bays and surf-lashed cliffs, a marble gorge carved over millennia, and two offshore islands where tradition and volcanic landscapes meet.

See page 145 for suggested itinerary options.



Beaches & Islands Taiwan

Taiwan's southern and eastern shores unfold in a tapestry of light, wind and water — coral-white coves, volcanic islets, pebble crescents and long, untamed Pacific surf. From Kenting's tropical bays to the quiet beauty of Hualien's starlit coastline, each beach offers its own rhythm: swimming and snorkelling in sheltered lagoons, surfing along wind-carved headlands, or drifting out on dolphin- and whale-watching cruises beneath vast, open skies. Offshore, Green Island and Orchid Island shimmer with reef life and rich Indigenous culture. Together, these coasts offer freedom, warmth and a deep, restorative sense of space.

Baishawan Beach - Kenting (Pingtung) | A sweep of luminous white sand and gentle turquoise water, Baishawan is Kenting's most inviting bay — perfect for swimming, strolling and unwinding at the elegant Chateau Beach Resort nearby.

Nanwan Beach (South Bay) - Kenting (Pingtung) | Golden sands and warm tropical breezes create a lively playground for surfers, paddle-boarders and sunset seekers, with beach cafés and casual bars adding effortless summer charm.

Jialeshui Beach - Kenting (Pingtung) | Wild, wind-carved and dramatic, Jialeshui's rugged cliffs and powerful Pacific waves make it the east coast's premier surf spot — raw beauty shaped by salt, wind and freedom.

Eluanbi Peninsula - Kenting (Pingtung) | Coral shelves, cliff-top paths and the iconic Eluanbi Lighthouse define this windswept southern tip — a perfect place for scenic walks and views of endless blue.

Little Bay (Xiaowan) - Kenting (Pingtung) | A small, sheltered crescent framed by coral headlands, Little Bay offers serene waters ideal for gentle snorkelling, quiet evenings and starlit beachfront moments.

Green Island (Lüdao) - Offshore Taitung | A volcanic island of coral gardens, blue coves and sea-turtle encounters, Green Island is beloved for its exceptional diving and rare saltwater hot springs under the stars.

Orchid Island (Lanyu) - Offshore Taitung | Home to the Tao people and their iconic wooden canoes, Orchid Island blends deep cultural heritage with pristine reefs, dramatic cliffs and luminous, untouched seascapes.

Sanxiantai - Taitung Coast | A sweeping, wave-shaped bridge leads to volcanic islets sculpted by wind and surf — the coast's most poetic sunrise walk, washed in gold and sea-spray.

Shitiping - Hualien Coast | Dramatic coral-limestone terraces meet deep blue surf, creating a dreamscape for snorkelling, tidal-pool exploring and embarking on whale- and dolphin-watching voyages offshore.

Qixingtai Beach - Hualien | A vast crescent of polished pebbles and ocean-blue waves, Qixingtai is perfect for sunset cycling, stargazing and watching dolphins crest the horizon.

Turtle Island (Guishan Island) - Yilan Offshore | A hauntingly beautiful, turtle-shaped volcanic island renowned for whale-spotting cruises, steaming geothermal vents and dramatic cliffs rising straight from the sea.

Dongyin Island - Matsu Archipelago | Remote and windswept, Dongyin offers cliffside trails, lighthouses, wartime tunnels and soaring seabird colonies — an evocative meeting of history, solitude and wild coastal light.



Exploring Taiwan

Taiwan packs a lot of interest into an area that's ideally suited to 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 service standards. Offering a refreshing mix of sea and mountain, often in close proximity, as well as a distinctive, exotic culture that stands in marked contrast to its image as a predominantly modern, urbanised island, Taiwan is guaranteed to inspire and surprise in equal measure.

When to go

Taiwan's subtropical weather is shaped 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, except in the mountains, where snowfall is common from late November through 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, personalised service and high-quality meals as standard. There are no direct flights from the UK; EVA operates to Taipei with a brief stopover in Bangkok, with a total flight time of around 16 hours and 30 minutes. Alternative long-haul airlines flying to Taipei's Taoyuan International Airport include KLM (via Amsterdam Schiphol), Cathay Pacific (via Hong Kong), Emirates (via Dubai) and Korean Air (via Seoul). Our consultants will advise you on the most convenient and cost-effective options.

Visa for British Nationals

British passport holders enjoy visa-free entry to Taiwan for stays of up to 90 days, provided their passport is valid for at least six months on arrival. No advance application or pre-departure paperwork is required for short stays; visitors are granted entry on arrival. Those planning to extend their visit, work, or undertake long-term study should apply for the appropriate visa in advance. Your TransIndus consultant will be pleased to advise on any recent policy updates.

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 rail network that enhances travel across the country. Domestic flights will only be necessary if you visit one of the smaller islands.

Accommodation

Taiwan boasts several fabulous luxury hotels in superb locations; if your budget permits, we recommend opting for them. A few are described in the preceding pages, but our consultants know of many more and are always on the lookout for new properties to supplement our portfolio. For those seeking experiential stays, we often suggest a night or two in the Pilgrims' Guest House in a monastery, particularly the Fo Guang Shan, where you can savour the atmosphere of the site once the day visitors have left. Equipped with en-suite facilities and air-conditioning, it is a cut above your average



monastery stay. English may not be spoken by all hotel staff, though your English-speaking driver-guide will always be on hand to assist if you need help with the language.

Food & Must-Try Dishes

Taiwan is one of Asia's great culinary capitals, where indigenous traditions blend with Fujianese home-cooking, Japanese finesse and an adventurous street-food culture. Even modest night-market stalls can offer extraordinary flavours. Must-try classics include beef noodle soup, the island's beloved national dish; delicately pleated xiao long bao (soup dumplings); soft gua bao filled with braised pork and pickles; and the famously comforting oyster omelette. Vegetarians are exceptionally well catered for thanks to Taiwan's Buddhist heritage, and travellers with specific dietary requirements will find the island notably accommodating.

Health & Safety

Taiwan is widely regarded as one of the safest destinations in Asia, known for its welcoming people, excellent healthcare and efficient emergency services. Tap water is best boiled before drinking, though bottled water is readily available. No mandatory vaccinations are required, but we advise standard travel inoculations and comprehensive travel insurance, particularly for trekking or adventure activities. Typhoons may occasionally affect the east coast from late summer to early autumn; your TransIndus consultant will ensure your itinerary remains seasonally appropriate and will adjust arrangements where necessary.

Suggested Itinerary

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.

Highlights of Taiwan | 9 Days

This elegantly paced journey offers a refined introduction to Taiwan, blending culture, scenery and gentle exploration with time to savour each experience.

Beginning and ending in Taipei, the route unfolds through misty mountain railways, tranquil lakes and forested highlands, revealing the island's softer rhythms alongside its vibrant urban life. Imperial art, living temples and historic streets provide cultural depth, while scenic journeys — by train, boat and road — allow landscapes to reveal themselves gradually. Days are shaped around balance rather than intensity: tea tasting on hillside plantations, quiet cruises across Sun Moon Lake, encounters with Indigenous traditions, and evenings immersed in the colour and flavour of night markets. Carefully selected hotels and unhurried transitions ensure comfort throughout, making this an ideal choice for travellers seeking insight without exertion.

Travelling with clarity, confidence and ease, Highlights of Taiwan captures the island's essential character — modern yet reflective, richly layered and quietly captivating.

UK - Taipei (3 Nights) - Sun Moon Lake (2 Nights) - Alishan (2 Nights) - Taipei (1 Night) - UK



Captivating Taiwan | 12 Days

This immersive journey invites you to experience Taiwan through participation, movement and close engagement with everyday life.

Designed for travellers who enjoy active discovery, it combines hands-on cultural encounters with varied landscapes, from fertile plains and mountain foothills to tropical forests and lakeside trails.

You will cook, cycle, hike and travel by historic railway, gaining insight through doing rather than observing alone. Time spent with Indigenous communities offers a rare perspective on traditions rooted in land and craft, while market visits, tea plantations and coastal villages reveal Taiwan's rich food culture and regional character.

The route is carefully shaped to maintain momentum without overload, balancing energetic days with moments of reflection. Scenic travel links each region seamlessly, allowing landscapes to shift naturally beneath the journey. Captivating Taiwan is an engaging, textured exploration of the island — active, authentic and deeply rewarding for curious travellers.

UK - Taipei (2 Nights) - Yilan (2 Nights) - Sun Moon Lake (2 Nights) - Chiayi (2 Nights) - Alishan (day visit) - Taichung (1 Night) - Taipei (1 Night) - UK



Taiwan Discovered | 16 Days

This thoughtfully paced journey offers a richly layered exploration of Taiwan, revealing the island through a seamless flow of culture, landscape and lived experience.

Beginning in Taipei, time is taken to engage with imperial art, vibrant neighbourhoods and nearby coastal escapes before the route arcs east into the marble canyons of Taroko Gorge. From here, the journey continues south along Taiwan's wild Pacific edge, easing into tropical beaches and open skies before pausing at Fo Guang Shan, where monastery life offers a moment of stillness and reflection.

Historic Tainan reveals Taiwan's cultural roots through its temples, markets and everyday rituals, while the forested heights of Alishan and the serene waters of Sun Moon Lake showcase the island's most iconic mountain scenery. Travelling clockwise around the island, with carefully balanced stays and unhurried transitions, this is a journey designed to let Taiwan unfold naturally, varied, immersive and quietly captivating throughout.

UK - Taipei (3 Nights) - Taroko Gorge (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.

See page 163 for suggested itinerary options.



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. (Pg 148-149)

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 windswept grassland. (Pg 153)

Naadam Festival | Archery, wrestling and horse racing are the sports followed most passionately in Mongolia and all three feature prominently in this festival, when tournaments are staged. (Pg 150-151)

Genghis Khan Equestrian Statue | Rising from the steppe east of Ulaanbaatar, this colossal monument celebrates Mongolia’s founder, offering panoramic views, a small museum, and a powerful sense of national pride. (Pg 160)

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 grasslands at this world-famous rescue centre. (Pg 152)

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. (Pg 158-159)

Khovsgol Nuur | This beautiful lake in the far north is the place to experience quintessential taiga forest, roamed by wolves, wolverines, bears, snow leopards – and nomadic reindeer herders. (Pg 156)

Eagle Hunters of the High Altai | The 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. (Pg 155)

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

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**



Ulaanbaatar

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

Historic monuments are thin on the ground here, though enough survive to make up a rewarding day's sightseeing. Prime among them are the Winter Palace of the Bogd Khan, a beautiful antique, Tibetan-style residence where the emperor passed 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, where a USSR-funded war memorial surveys an impressive sweep of suburbs and steppe.

See page 145 for suggested itinerary options.



Gandan Khiid Monastery

Set on the edge of Ulaanbaatar's sprawling ger district, Gandan Monastery is the spiritual heart of modern Mongolia and one of the few religious complexes to survive the turbulent Soviet years. Founded in 1727, it once housed thousands of monks before being largely destroyed during the purges of the 1930s. Today, it has been beautifully revived as a living centre of Tibetan Buddhist practice. Its great emblem is the towering 26-metre copper statue of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, which glows softly within its vast temple hall. The low murmur of prayers, the turning of prayer wheels, and the rhythm of daily rituals offer travellers a deeply atmospheric encounter with Mongolia's spiritual life.



Choijin Lama Temple

Another unmissable museum in Ulaanbaatar is housed within the Choijin Lama Temple, a remarkably preserved complex of six Buddhist shrines dating from the early 20th century. Built for the personal use of Mongolia's State Oracle, the temple now holds an exceptional collection of religious costumes, ritual masks, devotional sculpture, musical instruments and jewellery, all displayed in richly atmospheric surroundings. Standing in striking contrast to the city's surrounding skyscrapers, the Tibetan-style buildings remain deeply evocative. The main shrine is centred on a gleaming gold Shakyamuni Buddha, while neighbouring temples contain fierce, multi-limbed protective deities, framed by elaborately painted pillars, carved beams and incense-darkened prayer halls that evoke a world of ritual and belief.



Sukhbaatar Square

Vast, open and monumental, Sukhbaatar Square forms the ceremonial and symbolic heart of Ulaanbaatar. Framed by stately government buildings, the opera house, and key financial institutions, it reflects Mongolia's journey from socialist republic to modern democracy. At its centre stands the grand statue of Sukhbaatar, hero of the 1921 revolution, while the imposing colonnaded façade to the north honours Genghis Khan and the great Khans of the Mongol Empire. By day, the square is alive with families, schoolchildren and official business; by evening, it becomes a gathering place for relaxed promenades beneath wide skies — a vivid stage on which the life of the capital quietly unfolds.



National Museum of Mongolia

The National Museum of Mongolia offers the most compelling single introduction to the country's long and extraordinary story, spanning prehistoric cultures, the rise of the Mongol Empire and the Soviet era. Among its treasures are early bronze weapons, Scythian artefacts, exquisite Neolithic jewellery and richly embroidered royal and religious costumes that speak of nomadic artistry at its finest. Displays trace the evolution of traditional dress, shamanic beliefs, Buddhism and modern nationhood with clarity and depth. Particularly poignant are the Soviet-period galleries, including personal items from Mongolia's first cosmonaut. Thoughtfully curated and accessible, the museum provides indispensable context before exploring Mongolia's vast open landscapes.



The Naadam Festival

The Three Game of Men

Each July, Mongolia pauses to celebrate itself. Across towns, villages and wide sweeps of open steppe, Naadam unfolds — a festival that is part sporting event, part cultural pageant, and part communal homecoming. Officially known as Eriin Gurvan Naadam — the “Three Games of Men” — it is Mongolia’s most important festival and its most vivid expression of nomadic identity.

The three disciplines are always the same: wrestling, archery and horse racing, each rooted in skills once essential for survival and warfare on the steppe. Yet Naadam is far more than competition. It is a time when families gather, when people dress in their finest silk deel, and when the grasslands themselves seem to hum with anticipation.

In Ulaanbaatar, the largest Naadam takes place at the National Sports Stadium, opening with a colourful ceremony of dancers, musicians and riders that sets the tone for days of celebration. More than a thousand wrestlers, clad in tight shorts and open-chested sleeves, compete in a single-elimination contest that tests strength, balance and endurance, urged on by elaborately robed zasul — ceremonial “encouragers” whose chants echo through the arena.

Archery is quieter but no less compelling. Men and women alike take part, dressed in flowing silk robes and leather boots, loosing arrows at distant targets in competitions that reward precision honed over years of practice.

For many visitors, however, it is the horse racing that leaves the deepest impression. Held far from the city, out on rolling green grasslands, these are not short track races but long-distance contests across open country. Children as young as five ride, having trained for months alongside their horses, while hundreds of spectators spread across the steppe to watch the thunder of hooves and the dust rising under a vast summer sky.

Around the games, Naadam is alive with music, laughter and shared food — plates of khuushuur, bowls of fermented mare’s milk, families picnicking side by side. To witness Naadam is to see Mongolia at its most confident and celebratory — a nation honouring its past while welcoming a new season, together.



Central Mongolia | Beyond the City Gate

Beyond Ulaanbaatar, Central Mongolia is shaped by a mosaic of protected national parks safeguarding steppe, forest, dunes and volcanic landscapes. It is home to the ancient imperial capital of Karakorum, the UNESCO-listed Orkhon Valley, and enduring nomadic lifeways, offering a concentrated insight into Mongolia's natural diversity and historic heart

Gorkhi-Terelj National Park

Just east of Ulaanbaatar, Gorkhi-Terelj National Park offers an accessible yet richly rewarding introduction to Mongolia's landscapes and living traditions. Granite outcrops rise dramatically from open steppe, forested valleys follow clear mountain streams, and alpine meadows invite unhurried exploration on foot. Visitors may walk to the iconic Turtle Rock, hike through larch and pine forests, or climb to the Aryabal Meditation Temple. Scattered across the park are Bronze Age deer stones and ancient burial mounds, evocative reminders of Mongolia's early nomadic cultures. In warmer months, kayaking and rafting is possible on the Terelj River, while nearby ger camps offer insight into traditional life. A short distance away, the monumental Genghis Khan Equestrian Statue at Tsonjin Boldog marks the birthplace of Mongolia's legendary founder.



Khustain Nuruu (Hustai) National Park

Southwest of Ulaanbaatar, Khustain Nuruu National Park safeguards one of Mongolia's most remarkable conservation achievements: the return of the wild takhi, or Przewalski's horse. Once reduced to fewer than a dozen animals worldwide by the mid-1960s, the species survived only through a carefully managed international reintroduction programme. Today, around 200 horses roam freely across the park's rugged, rock-studded grasslands. An overnight stay at a nearby ger camp offers the best chance of sightings, particularly at dawn and dusk when takhi gather along stream banks. Beyond its celebrated horses, the park supports red deer, Mongolian marmot, grey wolf and the elusive Pallas's cat. During spring and autumn migrations, Khustain also becomes a rewarding destination for birdwatchers, as numerous species pass through this protected steppe landscape.



Khögnö Khan Nature Reserve

Khögnö Khan Nature Reserve lies at the meeting point of open steppe, granite hills and shifting sand dunes, dominated by the sacred Khögnö Khan Mountain, long associated with Chinggis Khan as a place of refuge and strategic importance. At the mountain's base stand the remains of the Övgön Khiid monastery, where rebuilt temples, birch-lined paths and forested slopes invite quiet exploration. To the north-east, the Elsen Tasarkhai dunes, often called the 'mini-Gobi' form a narrow ribbon of wind-shaped sand, ideal for walking, following Tarna River streams or taking gentle Bactrian camel rides. Further north-west lie the crater, lava tubes and basalt formations of the Khorgo Volcano, with nearby Terkhiin Tsagaan Nuur (White Lake) offering tranquil yet striking volcanic landscape shaped by fire and water.

See page 145 for suggested itinerary options.



The Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape

No journey to Mongolia is complete without time spent in the Orkhon Valley, just west of Ulaanbaatar. Recognised by UNESCO as the cradle of nomadic civilisation, this vast cultural landscape unfolds gently along the Orkhon River, flowing through expansive grasslands that invite travellers to immerse themselves fully in its remarkable breadth. Here, striking natural beauty, an enduring nomadic lifestyle and layers of spiritual, political and artistic life have accumulated quietly over centuries, creating a landscape that rewards unhurried exploration.

At the valley's heart lie the ruins of Kharkhorin (Kharakhorum), the 13th-century capital of Chinggis Khan's empire, once a cosmopolitan crossroads linking East and West. Beside it stand the gleaming white walls and silver stupas of Erdene Zuu Monastery, Mongolia's oldest surviving Buddhist complex and still its spiritual centre. Chanting monks, ringing bells and circling devotees set a timeless rhythm of prayer. Early risers may join morning prayers and receive a blessing, while the nearby Kharakhorum Museum offers an insightful introduction to the region's past and living traditions.

South-west of the ancient capital, the foothills of the Khangai Mountains reveal further highlights: the secluded Tövkhön Hermitage, Mongolia's first Buddhist site founded by Zanabazar, offers sweeping views and deep tranquillity; further west, the Orkhon Waterfalls plunge dramatically from lava cliffs into the river below, with opportunities for walking, swimming and rafting. Nearby, the Tsenkher Hot Springs provide a restorative pause in steaming mineral waters set amid rugged mountain scenery.

Travelling north from Kharkhorin leads to the Khushuu Tsaidam Complex, centre of the 8th-century Turkic runic inscriptions and a cornerstone of the valley's UNESCO status. Further northwest, Bronze Age deer stones stand scattered across the Upper Orkhon Valley. Throughout, warm nomadic hospitality remains an ever-present and defining experience.



Western Mongolia

In far southwestern Mongolia's Bayan-Ölgii region, Kazakh herders preserve the ancient art of eagle hunting, flying golden eagles across the Altai highlands. Bronze Age petroglyphs record prehistoric migrations, while Altai Tavan Bogd National Park leads towards Khüiten Peak and the vast Potanin Glacier — a landscape defined by endurance, isolation and extraordinary beauty.

Bayan-Ölgii

Bayan-Ölgii, Mongolia's westernmost province, is a striking cultural outlier, shaped as much by history as by geography. Considered the Hidden Gem of the nation, it nestles among low mountains near the Russian and Chinese borders. The region became a settled centre in the early 20th century when Kazakh families migrated here, drawn by pasture, trade routes and later modest mining and administrative opportunities. Ölgii, the provincial capital, grew as a regional hub and today houses nearly a third of the population, remaining connected to Ulaanbaatar by regular flights. Its appeal lies in its rustic charm: mud-brick homes, open markets, traditional Kazakh dress and an unhurried pace that feels refreshingly unchanged. The town serves as the natural launch pad for deeper journeys into western Mongolia.

Visitors can gain context at the Bayan-Ölgii Provincial Museum, while simple, yet comfortable hotels and guesthouses provide a base for exploration. Local cafés and restaurants serve hearty Mongolian and Central Asian fare, offering a warm welcome in a town defined by resilience, craftsmanship and enduring Kazakh identity.



Altai Tavan Bogd National Park

Altai Tavan Bogd National Park, often described as the *Heart of the Altai*, is Mongolia's most dramatic and remote protected landscape, where vast valleys, braided rivers and ice-bound peaks create a world of elemental beauty. Largely untouched by modern infrastructure, the park offers a profound sense of scale and isolation. Travel here unfolds through both landscape and human encounter: trekking on foot or riding across high pastures with Kazakh herders and staying in family gers where a warm welcome is assured. Shared meals, traditional music, archery practice and occasional introductions to local spiritual traditions offer insight into a culture shaped by resilience, generosity and deep knowledge of the land.

Khüiten Peak, rising to 4,374 metres on the Mongolian-Chinese border, is the highest of Mongolia's Five Sacred Peaks and a powerful spiritual presence. While experienced mountaineers are drawn to its remote base camp, most visitors experience the mountain through long treks across alpine meadows and glacial valleys, accompanied by local guides whose understanding of terrain, weather and wildlife is essential in this high-altitude environment.

Flowing from Khüiten's upper slopes, the **Potanin Glacier** is the longest in Mongolia and one of its most arresting natural features. Approaching it requires careful acclimatisation and sound preparation. Yet, the journey itself—across moraine fields and meltwater streams—reveals the fragility of the glacial systems that sustain the Altai's rivers and grazing lands.

In the lower valleys, **Khoton** and **Khurgan Lakes** offer moments of calm, their clear waters renowned for grayling and lenok fishing under strict catch-and-release regulations. Nearby, the Tsagaan Salaa and Baga Oigor petroglyphs preserve thousands of prehistoric carvings, while fleeting encounters with eagle hunters provide a glimpse into one of Central Asia's most enduring traditions.

See page 145 for suggested itinerary options.



The Eagle Hunters of Mongolia

On the high fringes of Mongolia's Altai Mountains, where winter hardens the steppe and the air carries the bite of snow, an ancient partnership between human and bird still endures. Clad in heavy Kazakh coats, fur-trimmed hats and leather boots, eagle hunters ride sturdy horses across the valleys, a magnificent golden eagle balanced calmly on a gloved arm. Known as *berkutchi*, these Kazakh herders have practised eagle hunting for centuries, passing their knowledge from generation to generation.

Female eaglets, prized for their size and strength, are traditionally taken from nests on sheer cliff faces and trained patiently to hunt foxes and other predators that threaten livestock. The bond between the hunter and the bird is close and deeply respectful. Eagles are flown only during the coldest months, when their thick plumage is at its finest, and after seven or eight years of service, they are ceremonially released back into the wild to breed.

For travellers, encounters with eagle hunters offer one of Mongolia's most potent cultural experiences. Guests may visit remote winter camps, observe training sessions, and learn how eagles are fed, hooded and cared for. In autumn, colourful eagle festivals near Ölgii bring together dozens of hunters and birds, offering dramatic demonstrations of skill set against a backdrop of mountains and open sky. Whether witnessed on horseback in the field or during festival displays, the sight of a golden eagle taking flight remains unforgettable — a living expression of nomadic heritage, resilience and deep respect for the natural world.

Northern Mongolia

Stretching towards the Russian border, Northern Mongolia is a land of wild mountains, taiga forests and the pristine waters of Lake Khövsgöl. In summer, larch forests and open grasslands replace winter extremes, drawing travellers to camp, fish, walk and ride horses along the lake's shores. The region is accessed via Mörön, its principal gateway and regional hub, well connected to Ulaanbaatar by road and air.

Khövsgol Nuur Lake

Often called the "Blue Pearl of Mongolia", Lake Khövsgöl lies in the far north of the country, close to the Russian border and beneath the forested slopes of the eastern Sayan Mountains. At 136 kilometres long and plunging to depths of around 270 metres, it is one of Asia's largest and purest freshwater lakes, holding almost 70% of Mongolia's fresh water. Fed by mountain streams, its clear waters drain south via the Eg River into the Selenge and ultimately Lake Baikal, linking two of the world's great lake systems.

Summer is the most popular time to visit. The lake's shores come alive with walking, horse riding, boating and kayaking. At the same time, nearby rivers and tributaries provide exceptional catch-and-release taimen fishing, one of the region's most sought-after wilderness experiences. For many Mongolians, Khövsgöl is revered as Dalai Eej — Mother Ocean — a place of deep spiritual significance. In winter, the lake freezes solid, allowing ice fishing and seasonal gatherings, with the March Khövsgöl Ice Festival offering a vivid glimpse of life on the frozen lake



Amarbayasgalant Monastery

Set in a secluded valley on the slopes of Mount Büren-Khaan, Amarbayasgalant is one of Mongolia's three great monasteries and among the finest to survive the communist purges. Built in the early 18th century, it remains a place of quiet authority and living religious practice.

Approached through rolling pasture and wild cherry groves, the monastery unfolds as a sequence of enclosed courtyards, richly decorated halls and long wooden galleries. Visitors can explore open temples, observe monks at prayer, and admire finely crafted roof tiles, painted beams and enamelled ceilings. The two-storey Tsoqchin Dugana is the architectural centrepiece, notable for its ingenious rain-drainage pillars and spacious interior.

Restored with UNESCO support, Amarbayasgalant is still home to a resident monastic community, offering a contemplative encounter with Mongolia's religious and artistic traditions.



Ushihiin Uver Deerstones

Hidden within a wide, windswept valley near Lake Khövsgöl in northern Mongolia, the Ushihiin Uver deer stones form one of the country's most compelling prehistoric landscapes. Dating back over 3,000 years to the late Bronze Age, these tall carved stelae are among the finest surviving expressions of a tradition once widespread across the Mongolian steppe. Their surfaces are etched with stylised flying deer, sun motifs, belts and weapons, suggesting ceremonial or funerary associations with elite warriors or shamans.

While the precise symbolism remains debated, many scholars interpret the deer as spirit guides, carrying the soul skyward after death. Scattered among low hills and ancient burial mounds, Ushihiin Uver feels less like a single monument and more like a ritual landscape. For travellers, it offers a quietly powerful encounter with Mongolia's deep past and enduring reverence for land and sky.



Taiga forests of northern Mongolia

Stretching across Mongolia's far north, close to the Russian border and the eastern Sayan Mountains, the taiga forests form one of the country's most remote and evocative landscapes. Dense with larch, pine and Siberian cedar, this vast forested world lies beyond the open steppe, encircling Lake Khövsgöl and reaching deep into the Darkhad Valley. Silence here is profound, broken only by the wind in the trees or the call of birds.

The taiga is particularly rewarding for birdwatchers, drawn by rare forest species and seasonal migrations, as well as for walkers and riders who value unspoiled wilderness. Travel is slow and elemental, following forest trails, pausing beside clear streams and high meadows. Accommodation is simple but atmospheric, typically in traditional gers or small wilderness camps. For those seeking space, stillness and immersion in nature, Mongolia's northern taiga offers a quietly compelling escape.



The Dukha (Tsaatan): Reindeer Herders of Mongolia

To the west of Khövsgöl Nuur, beyond the vast emptiness of the Darkhad Valley, live Mongolia's last nomadic reindeer herders: the Tsaatan, or Dukha. Numbering around 400 people across some 70-80 families, of whom roughly 40-45 continue active herding, they inhabit one of Mongolia's most remote borderlands, scattered through the taiga forests north and west of Tsagaannuur in Khövsgöl Province.

Ethnically Tuvan from southern Siberia, though long nationalised in Mongolia, the Dukha have preserved a way of life shaped entirely by reindeer. Their livelihood is inseparable from the animals, which provide transport, milk, hides and cultural identity. Reindeer meat is eaten only occasionally; herds are carefully protected and grown. Milk lies at the heart of the Dukha diet, used to make yoghurt, butter, cheese and milk tea, supplemented by foraged berries, pine nuts, wild plants, fish and limited traded goods.

The Tsaatan live in conical, tepee-style tents known as ortz, constructed from larch poles and canvas, and move camp five or six times a year in search of grazing and shelter. In winter, they descend to lower forested valleys; in summer, they scatter across higher ground in the Sayan Mountains, where cooler conditions favour reindeer health and access to lichen. Some families move closer to lakes during warmer months, supplementing income through small-scale tourism.

Shamanism remains central to Tsaatan belief, shaping relationships with animals, forests and mountains, all regarded as living entities deserving respect. Encounters are brief and carefully managed with an English-speaking guide, but offer a rare glimpse of a fragile way of life increasingly challenged by climate change, modernity and gold mining. Access requires a border permit, usually arranged in Murun, with accommodation in simple lodges or tents outside the taiga and occasional short stays near Tsaatan camps.



Southern Mongolia

Southern Mongolia is a land of vast horizons, where desert, steppe and mountain meet under immense skies. Reached by air or overland routes from Ulaanbaatar, the South Gobi reveals fossil fields, singing dunes, remote monasteries and sculpted rock formations — elemental, sparsely populated and deeply atmospheric.



Gobi Desert, Central South Cluster

The Central South Gobi forms the heart of desert travel in Mongolia and is the most accessible and concentrated region for exploration. Most journeys begin in **Dalanzadgad**, reached by scheduled flights or a long but steadily improving overland drive from Ulaanbaatar. As the regional hub, it provides supplies, fuel and orientation before travellers head deeper into the desert.

From Dalanzadgad, a network of dirt tracks leads into Gobi **Gurvansaikhan National Park**, a vast protected area encompassing desert plains, rugged mountain ridges and hidden valleys. Many travellers base themselves at a single, well-positioned ger camp within or close to the park, from which several key sites can be explored as day excursions.

Within the park lies **Yolyn Am (Vulture Gorge)**, accessed by vehicle followed by a gentle walk into a dramatic mountain canyon known for its birdlife, ibex and lingering summer ice. Further west rise the immense dunes of **Khongoryn Els**, among Mongolia's most iconic landscapes. Camel rides, dune walks and visits to desert oases are typically undertaken from camps nearby, often as a full-day excursion.

To the west of Dalanzadgad, the route to the **Flaming Cliffs of Bayanzag** crosses open desert and saxaul scrub. This world-famous dinosaur fossil site, best visited late in the day, is usually combined with onward travel rather than an overnight stay. Together, these locations form a coherent and rewarding circuit, offering classic Gobi scenery with relatively short driving distances between sites.

See page 145 for suggested itinerary options.



Gobi Desert, South-west Cluster

The western and south-western Gobi is more remote and exploratory in character, typically reached by extended overland travel from Dalanzadgad or from camps within **Gurvansaikhan National Park**. This region is less suited to a single base and is usually experienced as a moving journey, with distances dictating gradual progression between sites.

The most significant destination here is the **Nemegt Basin**, an isolated fossil field of global importance. Access involves long drives across gravel plains and dry riverbeds, reinforcing the sense of deep wilderness. Along the way, travellers may visit the **Khavtsgait Petroglyphs**, ancient Bronze Age engravings carved into rocky outcrops, often reached via short walks from vehicle drop-off points.

Further north lie the atmospheric ruins of **Ongiin Khiid**, once one of Mongolia's largest monasteries, now standing in quiet isolation beside a seasonal river. Small settlements such as **Temeen Chuluu** and **Khujirt** are encountered en route rather than as destinations, offering brief glimpses of everyday desert life and access to nearby canyons and burial sites. Travel here prioritises depth and discovery over comfort, rewarding those prepared for longer driving days.



Central Gobi Steppe

The landscapes of Dundgovi Province are typically explored overland from Ulaanbaatar or as a northward continuation from the South Gobi. Roads improve noticeably here, and distances between sites are manageable, though travel still involves sections of open steppe driving.

The most visited landmark is **Tsagaan Suvarga (White Stupa)**, easily reached by vehicle and often enjoyed as a dramatic stop rather than an overnight base. Its eroded limestone cliffs rise abruptly from the steppe, changing colour with the light. Nearby, **Baga Gazriin Chuluu** offers a compact area of granite formations, sacred caves and short walking routes, well-suited to half-day exploration. More remote is **Ikh Gazriin Chuluu**, a larger granite massif reached by rougher tracks and usually visited as part of a moving journey rather than from a fixed camp. Together, these sites showcase the softer, sculptural side of the Gobi, where steppe, stone and sky dominate the experience.

Stargazing & Remote Camps

Across Ömnögovi and Dundgovi, vast distances and minimal light pollution create some of the clearest night skies in Asia. From remote desert and steppe camps, the Milky Way arches vividly overhead, often visible in striking detail. Stargazing requires no special effort — evenings naturally unfold around campfires beneath constellations that feel almost within reach. Whether based in the South Gobi or travelling between regions, these nights of silence, clarity and scale are among the most memorable elements of a journey through southern Mongolia.



Eastern Mongolia

Eastern Mongolia is the country's cultural and ecological cradle, where forested mountains, sacred rivers and vast grasslands shaped Mongolia's earliest history. Less visited than the Gobi, it rewards those who travel thoughtfully, offering space, silence and encounters that feel quietly transformative rather than staged.



Kentii's Sacred Homelands

The Khentii Sacred Homeland is Mongolia's spiritual and historical heartland, a landscape of forested mountains and clear rivers intimately connected to the early life of Chinggis Khaan. This is a region best experienced slowly, where meaning emerges through landscape, story and stillness rather than spectacle.

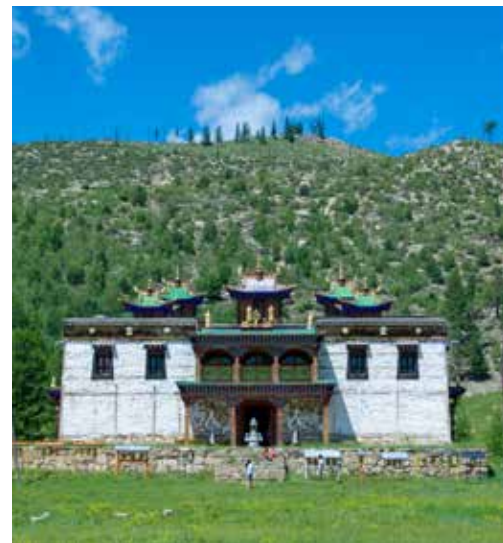
Access is typically by overland drive or short domestic flight from Ulaanbaatar, followed by road travel into the Khentii Mountains. We recommend staying in one well-located camp or lodge for several nights, using it as a base for gentle day journeys into the surrounding valleys and sacred sites. This unhurried approach allows the region's character to reveal itself naturally.

The Khentii Mountains rise softly, cloaked in larch and pine forests that shelter red deer, elk and birdlife such as black storks and raptors. Walking here is contemplative rather than demanding, often accompanied by local guides who explain enduring beliefs rooted in Tenger, the Eternal Blue Sky, and the reverence of mountains as ancestral guardians.

At the heart of the region stands Ikh Burkhan Khaldun, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of Mongolia's most sacred peaks. Traditionally approached with humility rather than climbed, it anchors a wider ceremonial landscape protected within Chinggis Khaan National Park. Nearby, Delüün Boldog, regarded as Chinggis Khaan's birthplace, adds symbolic resonance, while the Onon River winds quietly through open meadows associated with Temüjin's youth. In summer, its tributaries are also known for taimen, the legendary giant of Mongolia's rivers.

Smaller sites, including Binder Village, the Ulziit Gol and Balj river valleys, and Avraga Toson, the former palace site of Ögedei Khan add texture rather than drama. Evenings are spent in traditional yurts, sharing simple meals beneath forested hills and clear night skies.

See page 145 for suggested itinerary options.



Eastern Steppe & Wetlands – Dornod Province

If Khentii is shaped by forest and belief, Dornod Province is defined by space and movement. The Eastern Mongolian steppe remains one of the world's last great temperate grasslands — vast, uncluttered and profoundly humbling in scale.

Most journeys enter Dornod overland from Khentii or via flights to Choibalsan, the region's practical gateway. From here, we recommend travelling steadily from site to site, allowing the landscape to unfold gradually rather than rushing between highlights. This is travel measured in horizons and light rather than distances.

The core experience lies within the Dornod Mongol Grasslands, where immense herds of Mongolian gazelle migrate across the plains, sometimes in numbers that feel almost prehistoric. Wolves, foxes, and steppe birds such as demoiselle cranes and steppe eagles are also present, reinforcing the sense that the ecosystem is still operating on its own terms.

To the east, the Mongol Daguur Strictly Protected Area, part of the UNESCO-listed Daurian Steppe, introduces wetlands and shallow lakes that attract cranes, geese and pelicans, offering some of Mongolia's finest birdwatching. Buir Lake, set against a vast horizon near the Chinese border, softens the steppe with water and reed beds, supporting both wildlife and local fishing communities.

Deeper still lies the Nomrog Strictly Protected Area, where forest, steppe and wetland overlap in near-complete isolation. Human history is understated but present at the Khalkh Gol battlefield, a pivotal 20th-century site now reclaimed by grass and silence. Accommodation here is typically in simple mobile camps or local guesthouses, well-suited to travellers drawn to remoteness, wildlife and the quiet drama of Mongolia's eastern frontier.



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 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 made difficult by freezing conditions, heavy snow and the near absence of accommodation outside the main towns and cities.

International Flights

There are no direct flights to Ulaanbaatar from the UK. Journeys commonly involve one or two flights — one European or Middle Eastern hub and another in the Far East — with Istanbul, Doha, Dubai, Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo and Hong Kong among the most common stopovers. Whichever route you opt for, total travel time will typically be 18–24 hours. Our preferred carriers for streamlined service and competitive fares include Qatar Airways, Turkish Airlines, Korean Air and China Airlines. Routes and schedules do evolve, so we monitor this closely for optimal connections.

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 use comfortable, high-quality vehicles suited to your planned itinerary, ensuring flexibility and local insight. Domestic flights are rarely used unless you wish to visit very distant regions such as the Altai Mountains in the far west.

British passport holders currently require a visa to enter Mongolia. Visas can be obtained in advance via the Mongolian embassy or online e-visa system, and requirements may change, so we advise checking the latest entry regulations before travel.

Accommodation

While the choice of four- and five-star hotels is good in Ulaanbaatar, 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 a traditional style. Hot showers will also be available. We choose our camps carefully, taking into account the quality of the yurts, service standards, location and overall atmosphere.



Suggested Itinerary

Mongolia is too vast to cover in a single two- or three-week trip. Rather than seeing everything superficially, we recommend clients focus on one or two regions that offer varied geography and cultural riches. With an extra week, you could cross-section the country to see more of what it has to offer. One example is a 14-night tour that detours south into the shifting dunes of the Gobi Desert, or ventures north to Lake Khövsgöl and west through the Altai Mountains to spend time with Kazakh eagle hunters.

Essence of Mongolia | 9 Days

A beautifully balanced introduction to Mongolia.

A beautifully balanced introduction to Mongolia, this nine-day journey captures the country's defining contrasts — from the cultural depth of Ulaanbaatar to the elemental drama of the Gobi Desert and the wildlife-rich steppe beyond. After exploring the capital's great monasteries, museums and traditional arts, you fly south into the vast landscapes of Ömnögovi, where ice-filled gorges, singing sand dunes and ancient petroglyphs reveal the Gobi's surprising diversity.

Time is spent walking through Yolyn Am, climbing the great dunes of Khongoryn Els, visiting camel-herding families and exploring the legendary Flaming Cliffs, where dinosaur eggs were first discovered. Returning north, the journey continues to Khustain Nuruu National Park in search of the rare Przewalski horse, before ending amid the granite hills and river valleys of Terej and Gun Galuut, close to Mongolia's spiritual heartlands. Compact yet richly layered, this is an ideal first encounter with Mongolia's landscapes, wildlife and nomadic life.

Ulaanbaatar - Dalanzadgad - Yolyn Am - Khongoryn Els - Khavtsgait Petroglyphs - Bayanzag (Flaming Cliffs) - Khustain Nuruu National Park - Terej National Park - Gun Galuut Nature Reserve - Ulaanbaatar



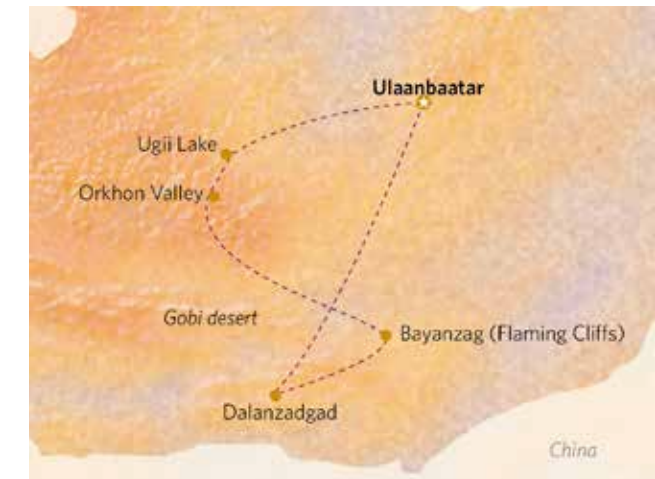
Gobi & the Steppe | 11 Days

A richly textured journey linking Mongolia's great desert landscapes.

A richly textured journey linking Mongolia's great desert landscapes with its historic heartlands, this eleven-day exploration moves from the raw drama of the South Gobi to the river valleys and grasslands that shaped nomadic civilisation. After time in Ulaanbaatar to absorb the country's cultural foundations, you fly south into the Gobi, where ice-filled gorges, towering singing dunes and prehistoric sites reveal a desert of surprising diversity. Encounters with camel-herding families, walks among ancient petroglyphs and time at the legendary Flaming Cliffs bring the region's human and geological history vividly to life.

Travelling north, the route follows a classic overland passage through Ongiin Khiid and into the UNESCO-listed Orkhon Valley, pausing for forest walks, hot springs, hilltop monasteries and optional kayaking on the Orkhon River. The journey concludes amid Mongolia's former imperial heart at Kharkhorin and the bird-rich shores of Ugii Lake, before returning to the capital — a rewarding cross-section of desert, steppe and spiritual landscape.

Ulaanbaatar - Dalanzadgad - Yolyn Am - Khongoryn Els - Khavtsgait Petroglyphs - Bayanzag (Flaming Cliffs) - Ongiin Khiid - Orkhon Valley - Tövkhön Khiid - Kharkhorin - Erdene Zuu - Ugii Lake - Ulaanbaatar



Northern Explorer | 14 Days

An expansive journey through Mongolia's cultural heartlands.

An expansive journey through Mongolia's cultural heartlands and remote northern frontiers, this two-week adventure traces a richly layered arc from the capital to the shores of Lake Khövsgöl. Beginning in Ulaanbaatar with its great monasteries, museums and traditional arts, the route soon opens out across wide grasslands, volcanic landscapes and forested valleys, where carefully chosen ger camps provide welcoming havens at the end of each day.

Along the way, ancient Buddhist centres such as Amarbayasgalant Khiid, Erdene Zuu and the hermitage of Tövkhön Khiid reveal Mongolia's spiritual depth, while encounters with nomadic families, camel herders and horsemen offer insight into a way of life shaped by season and terrain. Hot springs, sacred mountains and the historic Orkhon Valley punctuate the journey north, culminating at Lake Khövsgöl — the revered "Blue Pearl of Mongolia" — where time is set aside for walking, riding and quiet reflection, before returning south via fertile lakes and wildlife-rich steppe.

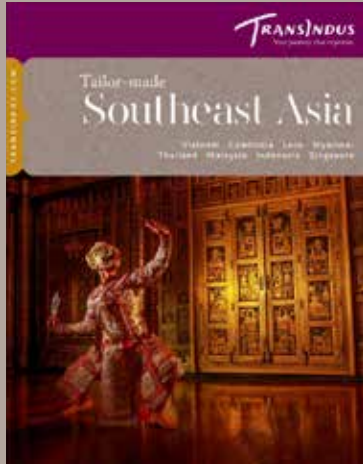
Ulaanbaatar (3 nights) - Amarbayasgalant Khiid - Bulgan - Lake Khövsgöl (2 nights) - Tsenkher Hot Springs - Orkhon Valley - Tövkhön Khiid - Ugii Lake - Khustain Nuruu National Park - Ulaanbaatar



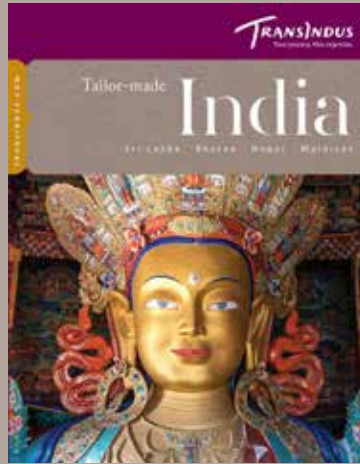
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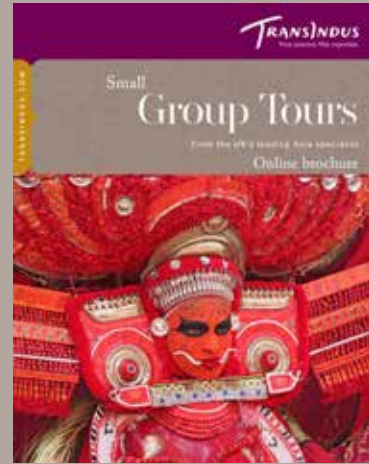
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Group Tours



I wanted to thank you most sincerely for organising **such a wonderful trip to China**. Everything worked perfectly from start to finish. Arrangements were seamless, our local guides and drivers were always punctual, helpful, and kind. Overall, a fantastic journey, and we returned home with amazing memories.

Paola Marchesini Bossi & family
China, 2025



The trip was excellent, and the driver guide extremely good and couldn't do enough for us. It's a trip I will highly recommend to others. I'll be back in touch to sort out the trip in January to Kerala and the Maldives.

Melanie Blythe
Taiwan, 2025



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