

Advice & Tips for Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines Indonesia & Brunei.

GUIDES:

- Get the Lonely Planet Southeast Asia guide. They are mainly available second-hand in the Kao San area, Bangkok or copies can be picked up in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam. It covers all the countries in the region and explains the best methods for crossing the borders.
- Perhaps print or at least take a look at the [Wikitravel](#) website's destination pages too. Other decent online guides, some with forums, include [GoUGo](#), [Lonely Planet](#), [BootsnAll](#) and [World66](#).
- Try to get hold of the full country guides whenever you cross a border, it's worth the extra detail - there are lots of used books along the well-trodden tourist trail.



TRAVEL TIPS FOR THE REGION:

- It is usually cheapest and best to begin your journey in Thailand, which is one of the more developed and tourist-friendly places in the region. Kao San Road is the region's 'decompression chamber' - East meets West, ideal to begin/end your journey, and you can buy anything you need from all over SE Asia and beyond.
- From Chiang Mai (Thailand) to Luang Prabang (Laos), always go for the slow boat – the speedboat is uncomfortable, loud and upsets the locals.
- Avoid the 'scam buses' from Bangkok's 'Khao San Road' area (Thailand) to Siem Reap (Cambodia). You'll get to the destination eventually, but it'll take longer, you'll go from guesthouse-to-guesthouse picking up other passengers, theft from the luggage store is not uncommon and the cheap ticket price is offset by the pricey 'commission' restaurants you're forced to frequent along the way. Leave the 'Khao San' area and go to the city bus stations – or opt for the more comfortable trains to the border area (Poipet). It's quicker, cheaper and safer. It is not a peasant journey, and the road on the Cambodian side is terrible. One of Thailand's airlines bribes the Cambodian government *not* to repair the freeway in order to encourage travellers to fly.
- Staying in cheap dormitories or single rooms, and eating mostly Western food over 2 months (and 4 countries), I spent around £1000 in total, though it can be done more cheaply. This excludes visas and travel in/out of the region.
- Travel between Thailand's islands can be slow and - like everything around the islands - more expensive. Decide whether to concentrate on the north (jungles, adventure sports, trekking) or the southern islands (sun, sea, sand, parties). Travel around the Philippines and Indonesian archipelago is also very time-consuming unless you fly.
- Most of the time one doesn't have to book cheap hostels beforehand – there will always be somewhere with a room available. (During busy times, it may be better to book ahead using the [Hostelworld](#) website if you are going to the islands – particularly during the Full Moon Beach party). Peak season is December to March. A good idea is to see what the current 'top rated' hostel is on the website and simply turn up, or find their website and drop them an email (thus avoiding Hostelworld's admin charges). [Hostelbookers](#) do not charge an admin fee.
- Train is the best way of getting around Thailand - they often have a bar and disco carriage - the night trains are great; they're also available in Vietnam but more expensive. The buses are very efficient in Vietnam, and they're the only option in Laos and Cambodia - which are a lot less developed – plus, the roads are awful. Cheap flights are available all over SE Asia and there's lots of agents around to help you book (though Laos Airlines are not internationally recognised as 'safe'). [AirAsia](#) is the region's leading budget airline.



HEALTH:

- About half of visitors take malaria pills, half don't – there is a lot of scare mongering. Personally, I wouldn't bother unless you're going deep off the beaten track into a jungle for weeks. They are not required around

Angkor in Cambodia. If you do want to take malaria pills, look into the effectiveness and side-effects of all the options and buy them when you're out there – they'll be cheaper. Bear in mind you usually have to take the pills several weeks after and a week before you travel, and that the person selling them is also likely to scaremonger in order to sell the most expensive course.

- Ensure your typhoid and hepatitis jabs are up to date but avoid forking out for a rabies jab – the jab will only extend the time you have to get to a hospital following a bite from an infected animal. Without an inoculation, you have 24-hours, with the injection, you have 48-72 hours. Unless you know you'll be several days away from a city, and playing with scanky dogs and monkeys, don't bother.

VISAS:

- At the time of writing, it was 'visas in advance' only for Vietnam and Myanmar. Thailand, Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore and the Philippines are generally visa-free whilst Laos, Indonesia and Cambodia require purchase on the border. Check official tourism/immigration websites online for the latest news.

WORK/VOLUNTEERING:

- It is possible to do a Trinity All Saints TEFL certificate in Thailand. Teaching opportunities may be found online, websites such as [Dave's ESL Café](#) are recommended.
- For volunteer opportunities in the region, see the [Lonely Planet Thorntree forum page](#). A good thing to do as you pass through the region, is to give blood.
- Give generously to local charities in lieu of handing money to beggars. Handing out pens/sweets/cash to local kids is discouraged - some NGOs claim it can lead them into exchanging other 'favours' for rewards, i.e. paving the way to prostitution.

CRIME/SCAMS:

- Crime against tourists – in terms of bag snatching/slashing – may be significant in some places, but violence is incredibly rare. Just padlock your day pack and wear a body belt (I hid it at the bottom of my sleeping bag at night) – I never had a problem or felt threatened. Secure bags on trains, perhaps by using a foolproof [PacSafe](#) wire mesh.
- It's not uncommon to be told your guesthouse is full/has shut down, your train is cancelled, the attraction is closed etc... in a bid to steer you towards commission-based places. Usually, if you are approached (particularly around transport hubs) by a random person, they are a tout and are not simply being friendly. 'Come to my uncle's shop', 'come for some tea', 'come to see my artwork' are common tricks in Asia which supposed 'English students' play in order to get you to commission-paying outlets.
- As a rule, ignore anyone who approaches *you* offering help – they may be very nice and polite, but they are so nice because they are in the business of parting you with your cash. Don't be reluctant to ask the locals yourself though.
- Insist taxi drivers use the meter where applicable and that tuk-tuk drivers take you directly to your destination (not shopping!) – tip your driver at the end if they don't mess around.



MONEY:

- The cheapest way to get cash is with your ATM card – all cities in SE Asia have machines, as do all airports. Take out as much as you can with each withdrawal as you will be charged a small gratuity by your bank back home. The only UK bank offering free international withdrawals is Nationwide (I have an account with them which I use just for travel). Unlike any other method, there is no commission with ATMs and the rate is based on the standard international rate of the day. Laos has limited international ATMs but Thai Baht, Lao Kip and US dollars are all accepted - it's a complicated 3-tier system, so just plan ahead.
- Go to [Oanda.com](#) and print off some 'cheat sheets' for whatever currencies you'll be using. A few US dollars, particularly, in small denominations are good for emergencies and tips – perhaps hide some in your main bag.
- You may find yourself being charged anything from twice to twenty times more for journeys, services and products than the surrounding locals. It's not worth getting paranoid and worked up about it as tourists simply have more money and people just



preying on ignorance of the true prices. You'll get a feel for prices, don't take it personally, it's just a game and is how commerce has worked for centuries - remember that taxi drivers do it to tourists in London, and barter gently with a smile (good-humoured bargaining ensures a better price!) Think of a price which you would be happy to pay – the seller will meet you in the middle. Aiming for half the quoted price is a good guideline, but it differs depending on where you are. Once you get the price you're aiming for, you're obliged to buy the item.

I've tried to not repeat too much from the guidebooks, so take this with you - it'll probably make more sense once you're actually in these places:

THAILAND

- Must see: Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Kanchanaburi, some of the islands.
- See the [Thailand Wikitravel page](#)
- If you arrive in the middle of the night at Bangkok airport and the buses have finished, negotiate for a taxi – 400-500baht is reasonable, there may be road tolls too. When asked by the taxi driver, it's worth claiming this is your 'second or third' visit to the country – see above for more safety/scams tips.
- **Bangkok** - See the Grand Palace, the huge Chatunchak weekend Market, Kao San area, Reclining Buddha monastery, Siam Square and its luxury cinemas, and the night markets. You may wish to avoid the dodgy sex shows/'ping pong' shows – as working conditions for the girls are as dire as you imagine. See above regarding Kao San Road – it is cheaper to stay just off Kao San itself, Rambuttri is a great option (asked to be dropped off by the police station). The Kao San market is bigger, busier and cheaper at night.
- **Kanchanaburi** - An hour or two away from Bangkok. See the Bridge over the River Kwai, Death Railway Museum and take a tour from the cheap-and-cheerful 'Jolly Frog Hostel'. Avoid the notorious 'Tiger Temple' where you can stroke a live, chained big cat – a CWI (Care for the Wild International) [report](#) from 2007 confirmed trafficking, drugging and abuse at the supposed 'sanctuary' – it does not do what it says it does, don't be fooled! Hell Fire Pass is a bit of a trek but see it if you're really interested in the history.
- **Ayutthaya** - Thailand's old capital, very different, lots of history. Hire a scooter and tour the Wat Temples in a day or two.
- **Ko Phangan** - Book ahead and arrive early if you're hoping to go to the monthly Full Moon Party - the world's biggest beach party. You can get boats to other islands from here. Avoid staying on Had Rin beach, it's very expensive and Westernised - find another beach, check out The Sanctuary Hotel in your guidebook for dirt cheap dorm beds.
- **Chang Mai** - Get the fantastic night train up from Ayutthaya or Bangkok, lots of adventure sports and a cooler climate. Jungles, mountain biking, elephant rides, white water rafting, bungee jumping - all safe, all very cheap, great food and night markets.
- **Pai** - Three hour winding bus ride from Chiang Mai – very little to do except relax – rafting here is the best in the region – I recommend Thai Adventure Rafting - or hire a scooter and travel to Mae Hong Son. Avoid 'Human Zoo' tourism, particularly of the Long Neck tribe from Burma (see this [BBC News](#) story)
- **Ko Samet** - Ideal if you want to see a beach island but haven't the time to head south – this resort is 3-hours from Bangkok and popular with Thai people.
- **Ko Samui** – One of the better islands, huge beaches, not too busy, a happy medium.
- **Rai Leh, Krabi** – Some of the world's best climbing at this beach, the best in Krabi.
- The best resource for seeking out the best 'undiscovered', quieter islands off the beaten track is [Tezza's Beaches and Islands blog](#). **Koh Mook** is a great quiet option.



LAOS

- Must see: Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng
- See the [Laos Wikitravel Page](#)
- Hardcore bargaining is not necessary in Laos and may cause embarrassment. Decent medical facilities are near non-existent in Laos, you'd need to go to Thailand.
- The local currency 'kip' is used for cheaper items, 'Thai Baht' for more expensive things and US dollars are the top tier currency.

It's best to travel with a stash of all three, but try and support the local currency, you'd be doing a favour to the economy.

- **Vang Vieng** - Backpacker slum, all your guidebook says about it is true, it's a Westerner's party town and little else, go 'inner-tubing' on the river.
- **Luang Prabang** - Gorgeous place, adventure sports available, see the waterfalls and beautiful temples – some of the best tourist tat for sale here at great prices. Do your shopping here; they have some lovely handmade things on sale.
- **Vientiane** - Great food, a sleepy riverside capital, check out the museums and temples, perhaps hire a scooter.
- **Savannakhet** - Last stop before Vietnam, a very chilled out riverside town with amazing crumbling French colonial architecture. See the Dinosaur Museum and temples.

CAMBODIA

- Must see: Siem Reap/Angkor, Phnom Penh
- See the [Cambodia Wikitravel page](#)
- **Siem Reap/Angkor** - Home to one of the wonders of the world, Angkor Wat. Find a hostel around Bar Street. The Landmine Museum is a must-see. And it may not be in your guidebook, but research seeing the temples by electric bike – it's the best way. They're available about 100 metres before the main entrance. Save your money and go for the Angkor day-pass – guidebooks suggest this is a crime, cramming into one day what should take 3. However, I and many fellow travellers found that 2 days was too much and 1 full day would've been fine – particularly as 90% of the very-expensive ticket price goes to a Vietnamese oil company, rather than to conservation. Also, the people who live amongst the temples do not see any of this money, so support them (however much they hassle you)!
- **Phnom Penh** - Check out the links on [my Cambodian trains](#) page and go on the one remaining (if it's running) – it's a unique experience. Also, see the S-21 Torture Museum and the Killing Fields – prepare to be horrified. Avoid any 'shooting ranges' and stay at a cheap hostel on the riverside.
- **Sihanoukville** - Not the paradise your guidebook makes out, but if you've time to burn, check out the Snake House Restaurant.



VIETNAM:

- Must see: Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Ha'Long Bay
- See the [Vietnam Wikitravel page](#)
- To cross the roads in Vietnam, slowly walk into the traffic allowing it to flow around you – if you move too fast or hesitate, it'll confuse the drivers. I hired a scooter for 75,000 Vietnam Dong per day, but you may not share my death wish.
- The quickest overland route between Hanoi in the north, and Ho Chi Minh City in the south, is by train and it takes over 17 hours. Most tourists take the bus and stop along the way. If you've only a couple of weeks, consider sticking to either the north or south. Hanoi is a good base for visiting the attractions up north, and is generally preferred to the south.
- **Hanoi** - Stay in the 'Old Quarter', check your room before agreeing to it. You'll find dorms for around 45,000 Vietnam Dong. Hanoi Backpackers is a good option – there is a map [on their website](#). As well as tours to **Ha'Long Bay**, trips to **Sapa** are also popular – the mountain scenery, trekking to ethnic minority villages and Bac Ha Sunday market are all worth seeing. The museums are great and very cheap, some accept student cards and some charge for, or prohibit, camera use. Check out Ho Chi Minh President Mausoleum and Museum (the Mausoleum is closed between October and December for annual re-embalming.). The One Pillar Pagoda is also within the complex – the opening hours of the mausoleum are very limited so check beforehand. Also pay a visit to the Army Museum with Flag Tower (if only for the propaganda). Van Mieu (The Temple of Literature) is beautiful; The Hanoi Hilton Prison is interesting and also loaded with propaganda (it is where John McCain was detained). Other attractions include the Opera House (French style building), the Old Quarter – great to walk around the markets, Hoan Kiem Lake and the Ngoc Son pagoda, St. Joseph Cathedral and the brilliant Water Puppet Theatre (unmissable!).
- **Ha'Long Bay** - It's much cheaper to book ahead in Hanoi for your transport to Ha'Long Bay. The 2-day tour is enough and it's very competitive and so dirt cheap – remember, you get what you pay for, try and find a reputable company.
- **Hue** - I took a bus from here to Savannakhet in Laos.
- **Da'Lat** - This hill town has a 'British' climate – it is refreshing to spend a few days here. Read up on the 'Easy Riders', they're brilliant but try and ensure you get a genuine original guy, not just any old bloke with a scooter who reckons he is one. There are only around 100, I ended up with a 'fake' Easy Rider, but you still see the same things (the Crazy House, Chicken Village, waterfalls, indoor market etc...)

- **Nha Trang** - Full Moon Parties at the Sailor's Club are great, watch out for pickpockets when you leave at 4am. Go for a day out on a boat, it's overrated but a must-do.
- **Ho Chi Minh City** - Bigger than Hanoi but not the capital, the museums here are great. Pay a visit to the Cu Chi Tunnels and one of the water parks. It is easy to get a bus from here to Phnom Penh in Cambodia or vice-versa.

MALAYSIA:

- Must-see: Kuala Lumpur, Perhentian Islands, Kota Kinabalu
- See the [Malaysia Wikitravel page](#)
- Malaysia is split between Peninsula Malaysia and Borneo Malaysia. Air Asia is the best bet for travel between the two.
- **Kuala Lumpur** – The capital; see the Tourist Board dance show and the Eye on Malaysia Ferris wheel and light show. Restaurants in the capital are great, and Chinatown is worth a visit. The Petronas Towers viewing platform is surprisingly underwhelming.
- **Cameron Highlands** – Take a tour and see the local farms, rose garden, waterfalls, jungles etc..
- **Penang** – Island off the north west, fantastic colonial history.
- **Perhentian Islands** – Two dreamy tropical islands off the north-east coast. Find a quieter beach than the main Long Beach and relax amongst the sea turtles, monitor lizards, crystal clear water and laidback atmosphere. Snorkelling and diving are great here, and it is accessible by direct tourist minivan. Unmissable.
- In **Borneo Malaysia**, the main cities are **Kuching** in the West ('Cat city' – see the orang-utan sanctuary and the excellent free museums), **Miri** (a stop off before Brunei) and **Kota Kinabalu** (the main hub for treks into the mountains, jungles and minority villages).

SINGAPORE:

- Must-see: Esplanade, Chinatown, Little India
- See the [Singapore Wikitravel page](#)
- It is possible to take a train to Singapore from Kuala Lumpur, but consider getting off the train at the border and walking through no-man's land rather than waiting for several hours on board.
- **Esplanade** (the 'Theatre on the Bay') is a fantastic piece of architecture and is talking distance from the harbour, **Raffles Hotel** and iconic **WWII memorial**.
- **Little India** has a fantastic atmosphere and is near to the **Thieves Market**.
- A visit to the **Judgement in Buddhist Hell exhibition** at **Haw Par Villa** is an interesting and bizarre experience. Through gruesome models, it features the ten steps of judgement before reincarnation. Take SBS bus 200 from Buona Vista MRT Station (EW21).
- There are several temples – Buddhist and Hindu – worth visiting. Singapore is also a shopping hub and has endless malls, restaurants and markets.

INDONESIA:

- Must-see: Bali, Borobudur, Yogyakarta
- See the [Indonesia Wikitravel page](#)
- It is possible to enter overland from Singapore by taking a ferry to Batam in Sumatra. Beware of the persistent touts on the Indonesian side and make a beeline for the airport or the next city.
- **Jakarta** – The capital disappoints most visitors as it is mostly an administrative base with very little to do for tourists, beyond the national museums. I would suggest hopping on a train to Yogyakarta as soon as possible.
- **Yogyakarta & Borobudur** – Be sure to see gamelan music and a cultural performance either here or in Bali. A day trip to Borobudur will take you to the 'Angkor' of Indonesia – a splendid, recently resorted ninth-century Mahayana Buddhist monument.
- **Bali** – Split your time between the tourist and nightclubbing hub of Kuta (the 'Kao San' area of Indonesia, full of mainly Australian backpackers) and Ubud (the arts/crafts capital, very laidback, be sure to see a cultural song/dance performance and the Enchanted Monkey Forest). Bungee jumping, trekking, white-water rafting and other adventure sports are all possible in Indonesia's tourist centre.
- **Gilis and Lombok** – Two beautiful islands near Bali, great to escape to and excellent diving.
- **Banda Ache** is said to have amongst the most idyllic beaches in the world, whilst a visit to **Papua** is meant to be magnificent – both can be difficult to access unless you fly.

BRUNEI:

- Must-see: Bandar Seri Begawan
- **Bandar Seri Begawan** - Most people of this very rich oil state live in 'BSB', the capital. A day or two spent here whilst passing down through Malaysia is interesting, with the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque, a water taxi around the Kampong Ayer water village (B\$30 for an hour-long tour) and the Brunei and Royal Regalia

museums all worth seeing (the museum's are free). Pusat Belia (youth hostel) and KH Soon Resthouse are the only cheap accommodation options in the small city. Hitch-hiking is a great way of getting around here.

- There are flights and direct bus/boat combos between Miri and BSB and Kota Kinabalu.
- See the [Brunei Wikitravel Page](#)

MYANMAR (BURMA):

- Must-see:
- See the [Myanmar Wikitravel page](#)

PHILIPPINES:

- Must-see: Palowan, Manila, Borocay
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- See the [Philippines Wikitravel Page](#)

