

# 52 weekends

*A year's worth of travel*

Edited by Stuart McDonald



A TRAVELFISH.ORG TRAVEL GUIDE

# 52 Weekends



What is a year but 52 weeks? And what is a week but five days on each side of a weekend? Here are 52 ideas for 52 weekends in Southeast Asia to create a year's worth of travel without submitting a leave form.

# About this guide

## OVERVIEW

- Everything in this guide could be done over a weekend. In many cases, three or four days would be more comfortable.
- Each section includes a link to read more detailed information on [Travelfish.org](https://www.travelfish.org). That's where you'll find detailed listings and the nuts and bolts you'll need to turn dreams into reality.
- You may see an Agoda icon at the top right of a page. Click to browse hotel options. Should you make a booking we may be paid a commission. Thank you.
- Every place in this guide has been visited in person by a [Travelfish.org](https://www.travelfish.org) researcher.
- [Travelfish.org](https://www.travelfish.org) always pays its way. No exceptions.

It's easy to get overloaded with travel intelligence today. Between guidebooks, the internet and millions of travellers sharing their advice online, sometimes it can all be a bit too much and the temptation to just do what everyone else is doing takes over. It need not be that way.

We've taken a part of the world we know a fair bit about and selected 52 places that we believe are great. Some are well known, others far less so, but many can easily be added on to an already existing trip.

We've tried to lean towards places that don't quite get the attention we think they deserve and we've worked to cater to most interests. Whether you're a beach bum, a food lover or a nature worshipper, something somewhere within these pages should inspire you.

Think of it as your ordinary travel being your Monday to Friday gig and here we present you with 52 opportunities to break up the drudgery of your regular travel routine! Or if you live in Southeast Asia, these may be 52 genuine one-off getaways for you.

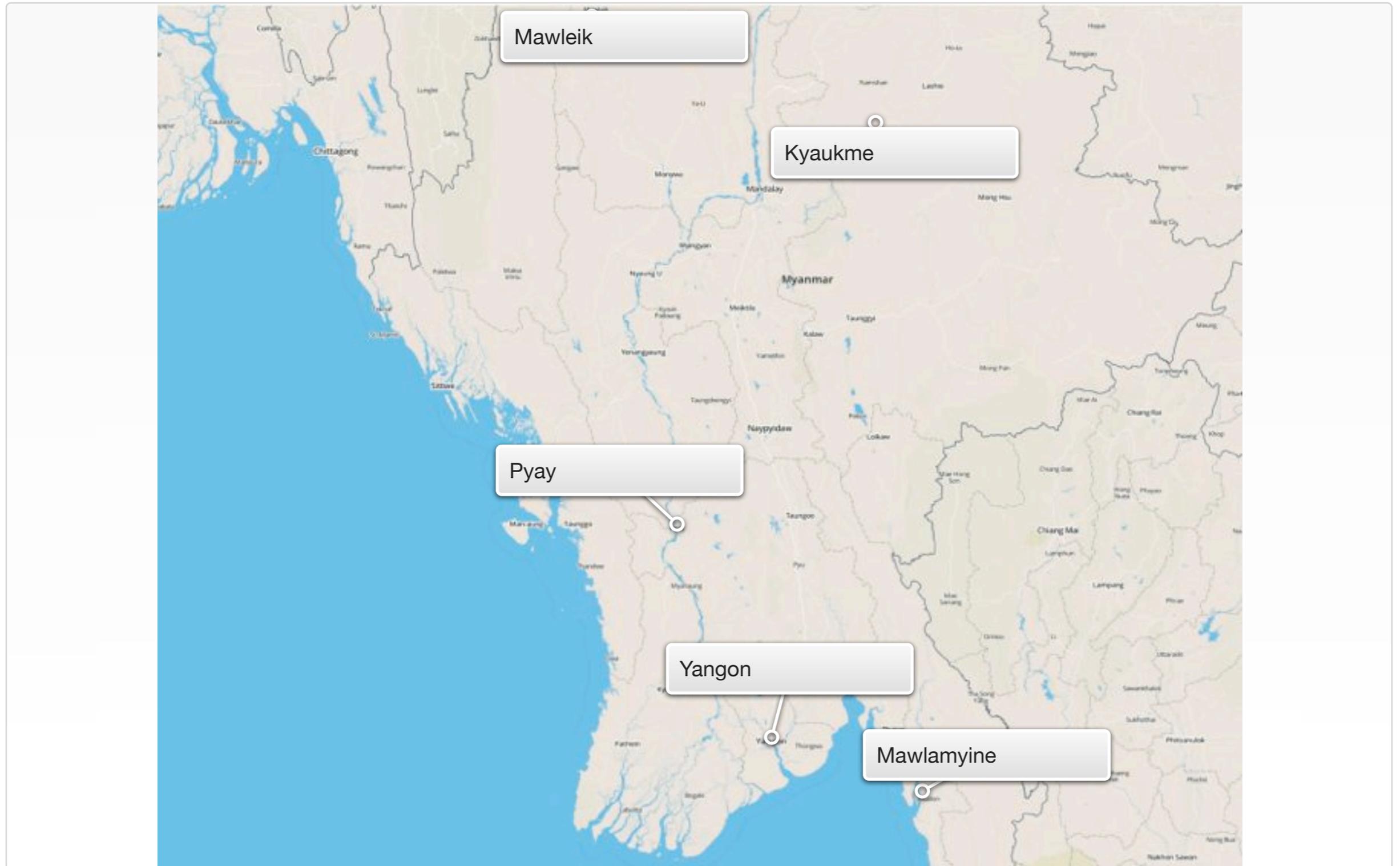
One request. When you're finished with this guide, please pass it onto someone else who you think might like it. Thanks and happy travels!

# Burma (Myanmar)



Burma is Southeast Asia's new flavour of the month and the country is changing fast. It can be a fascinating destination, particularly for those willing to get a little off an already well-beaten trail.

# Burma (Myanmar)



# Kyaukme



Burma's Kyaukme is a world away from the trekking hordes of Northern Thailand. On a simple day trek out of town we saw not a single other foreigner, stumbled upon a fair at a 200-plus-year-old pagoda and joined in the fun.

# Kyaukme

## LOGISTICS

- Kyaukme is in Shan State in northern Burma, midway between Mandalay and Hsipaw.
- There's just one guesthouse that accepts foreigners, the A Yone Oo Hotel. It's adequate – nothing more, nothing less.
- Simple Shan food is available around town, especially by the market. There's one English menu in town, opposite the above-mentioned guesthouse.
- Kyaukme can be reached by bus and train from both Mandalay and Hsipaw, along with Pyin Oo Lwin.
- We recommend contacting John ([john.kyaukme@gmail.com](mailto:john.kyaukme@gmail.com)) for your trekking needs.

While Hsipaw further to the east of Kyaukme has a more mainstream claim to Burma's alternative trekking centre, Kyaukme is a welcome relief to those looking for something even simpler and more unadulterated.

It's a low-key town, and despite being considerably larger than Hsipaw, it lacks the hustle and bustle of its better known neighbour, though it does draw a small steady stream of both independent travellers and "adventure group" tours looking for something a little different.

You'll most likely travel by motorbike for up to an hour to reach the trailhead, depending on the trek you're doing, and from there you can expect some solid, though not excessively difficult, walking. We found the scenery of rolling hills and quite deep ravines to be even more spectacular than on the Kalaw to Inle Lake trek and, well, we didn't see another foreign trekker the entire time. So if you're after at least the illusion of being in virgin territory, you're in the right place.

The town itself is, well, uneventful, but the central market is worth a look and should you be heading west, consider taking the train as far as Pyin Oo Lwin to take in the impressive Gokteik Viaduct.



*Seated Buddha in village temple.*



# Mawlamyine



"By the old Moulmein pagoda lookin' lazy at the sea..." wrote Rudyard Kipling on his 1889 visit, and we reckon probably not a lot has changed since in this very sleepy, yet absolutely charming town.

# Mawlamyine



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Mawlamyine was previously known as Moulmein – you will still see it marked on some maps that way.
- Mawlamyine is in Mon State, a few hours (or so!) south of Yangon.
- Accommodation is a bit of a mixed bag and you may find yourself paying more than you really want to – most make a beeline for the Cinderella.
- Be sure to savour a sunset from one of Mawlamyine's riverside cafes.
- Unusually (for Burma) traffic is relatively light, making Mawlamyine a great spot for a wander on foot.

Mawlamyine was in former times the British capital of Lower Burma, and today is Burma's fourth largest city, after Yangon, Mandalay and Nyapitaw. While "modernity" has brought with it a truly hideous line of shophouses along the waterfront, plenty of Victorian period architecture remains, plus a few of the country's most venerable mosques and of course Kipling's splendid old pagodas.

The waterfront is lively, with fishing boats and passenger ferries departing and arriving from all points, and a couple of great markets, but otherwise it's a delight to just wander the quiet, tree-lined streets, wondering which buildings would have been around when George Orwell was part of Mawlamyine's police force.

There's a great feel to this cosmopolitan little town. Watch the world go by from market tea shops, check out the sunsets from waterfront cafes, look lazy at the sea from ancient hilltop pagodas and meet what we reckon are some of the friendliest of the country's inhabitants.

Mawlamyine can easily keep most visitors happy for a couple of days, and a few visit-worthy sites are also located within easy striking range of town. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Incense sticks out to dry.*



# Mawleik



This is the village the world forgot. It's an enthralling getaway on a river to nowhere with a gladbag of distractions to keep the more intrepid traveller occupied and, well, just loving Burma.

# Mawleik

## LOGISTICS

- There is no road to Mawleik. It is around five hours upriver from Monywa (in November) which, in turn, is around 12 hours upriver from Monywa.
- Mawleik is on the west bank of the Chindwin River in the lower reaches of Chin State.
- Accommodation is limited, but the ANZ Guesthouse is the best option in town – we just wish their walls were thicker.
- A cluster of eateries lie by the river. The “Chinese place” screens international football!
- You may come across an elderly teacher offering to show you around. We enjoyed the half day we spent with him.

We'd initially planned to approach Mawleik from the north by boating downriver from Homalin in the mid-reaches of Chin State. Flight timetables out of Mandalay conspired against us, meaning we ended up tackling it from the south, by boat from Monywa. It was slow going.

But it was well worth it. In many ways, Mawleik is just another village in Burma, and maybe we were just sun-stroked from the boat and would have been happy to alight anywhere, but this is a beautiful spot.

Some British-period relics -- including a golf course -- are lying around and there's a hospital that was supposedly the site of a mass suicide by Japanese soldiers. The real attractions though are the rolling hills, the rice fields, and, of course, the river trundling past.

If you spend any time at all in Mawleik you'll most likely be button-holed by a friendly, if sometimes overbearing, elderly English teacher. A half day spent with him is a half day very well spent.

Further afield there's a forgettable working elephant camp, and a crater lake that is popular with locals, though at the time of our visit, this was off limits to foreigners.



*Passing traffic.*



# Pyay



A riverside town midway between Yangon and Bagan, Pyay hosts a deeply revered pagoda and some pleasant riverside scenery (plus karaoke!). Further afield, you'll find two of Burma's more underrated sights. Give it at least a night if you can.

# Pyay



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Kyaukme is in Bago Region, midway between Yangon and Bagan.
- There's an adequate selection of lodgings, with backpackers heading to Myat Lodging House, and Lucky Dragon attracting the flashpacker to midrange crew.
- Don't leave Pyay without trying May Ywet War Myanmar Restaurant, better known as Auntie Moe's.
- Pyay can be reached by bus and train from Yangon, with straightforward direct night buses onwards to Bagan.

Pyay forms a convenient spot to break the western route between Yangon and Bagan. Boasting a quite spectacular pagoda, a collection of ancient ruins, some relaxed riverside scenery and, for the more adventurous, a series of impressive cliffside carvings well outside town, Pyay is worth an overnight stay.

We found Shwesandaw Paya's best approach was from the riverbank; the views from the summit are all-encompassing, from the bridge over the river to the south across to the northern reaches of town. Further afield, the ancient ruins at Thayekhittaya have been described by some as "Bagan lite". A small museum lies on site with the ruins scattered across a sizeable area that doubles as an archaeological site as well as a living, working farm community.

The third prime-time attraction is the cliffside carvings at Akauktaung. These can be visited on a long half-day trip from Pyay. The trip involves a two-hour each way motorbike ride followed by a 30-minute boat ride along the Ayeyarwady river. The carvings are impressive and if a trip here fits into your budget, we'd say it is well worth it -- just try not to do it in the pouring rain, as we did. [Read more on Travefish.org.](#)



*Old building, Pyay.*



# Yangon



Easily the most “Asian” Southeast Asian metropolis, Yangon (previously Rangoon) assaults the senses. Walk it, eat it, breath it, savour it -- we reckon nowhere else in Southeast Asia is quite as fabulous as Yangon.

# Yangon



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## LOGISTICS

- Yangon was the capital of Burma before the country's mentally challenged rulers shifted it to Nyapidaw, a few hours to the north. It remains the commercial capital.
- Accommodation is expensive. Backpackers should prepare themselves for paying double Thailand's rates for half the standard of Laos.
- Yangon has a fabulous eating scene, though Burmese food is a bit of an acquired taste. It can be very oily. Those looking for Western alternatives will struggle at times. You will likely get sick.
- Sit down for tea. Stalls are everywhere and are great for people watching.

Yangon is a compelling mix of golden pagodas, colonial architecture, hastily erected scaffolding and history-stained streets. As the country stumbles towards democracy, with the military government softening the controls they brutally exercised over the last half-century, massive change is underway.

Yangon hosts the largest number of intact colonial buildings in Asia, although some might argue about the definition of "intact". The poorly maintained, crumbling buildings reflect a colourful history while providing a backdrop to the vibrant energy of Yangon's daily street life, bustling and busy at their foundations.

Buddhist monks and nuns somehow blend into the crowded streets, drawing attention during their morning alms walks. Pagodas are abundant, but none is so famous as the one sitting atop a hill in the middle of Yangon: Shwedagon Pagoda is a must see.

Make sure to allow time to slowly explore Yangon's nooks and crannies. They hold some of the most beautiful snippets of history and colour; linger in tea shops and take your time getting to know the delicious local cuisine. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*You don't notice it at first, but no motorbikes. They are banned in Yangon*

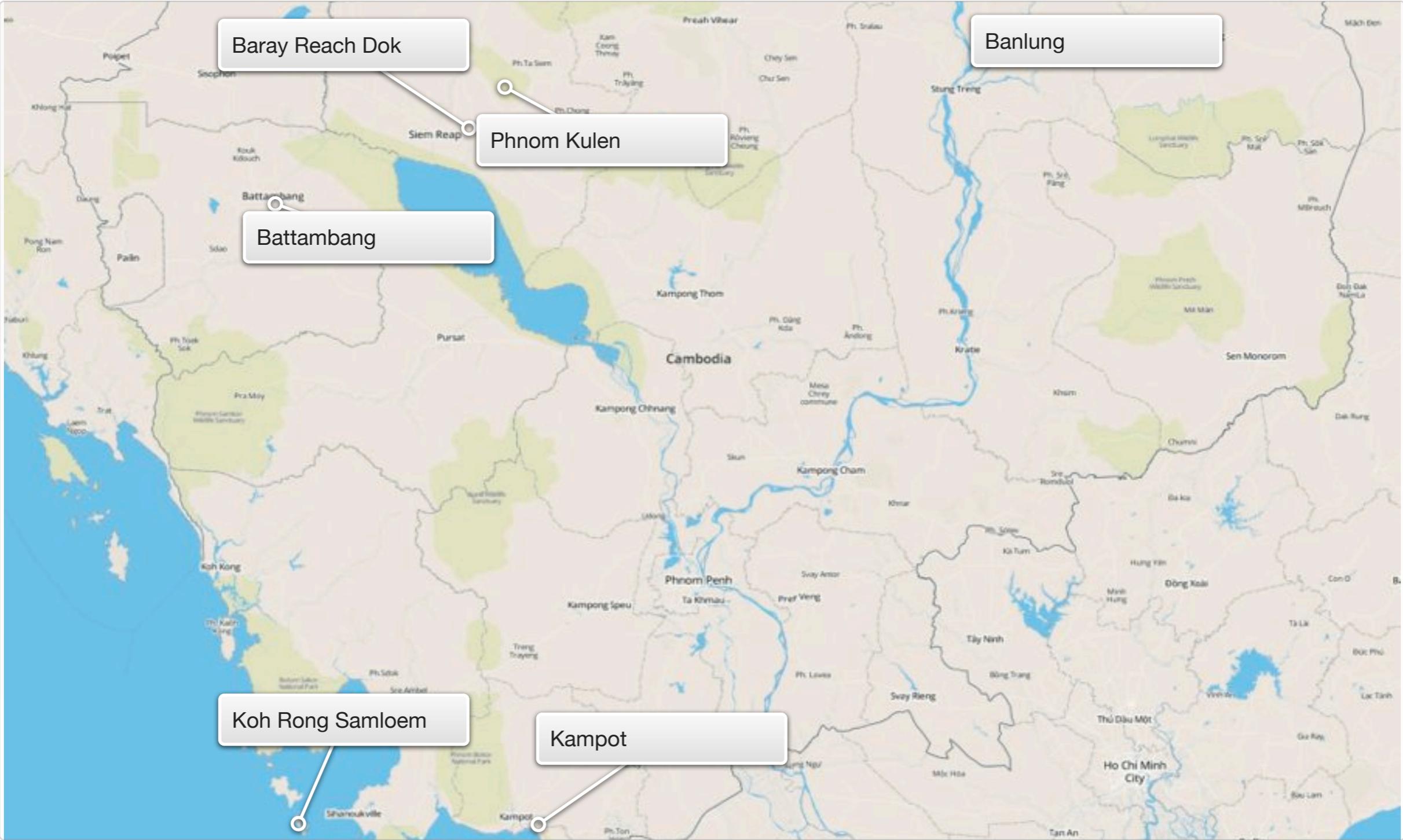


# Cambodia

The image is a collage of ancient stone carvings from Cambodia. The top section shows a dark, weathered stone surface with intricate bas-reliefs. The middle section features a central, light-colored stone sculpture of a Buddha head with a serene expression, surrounded by other carvings of figures and patterns. The bottom section shows more detailed carvings, including a figure in a dynamic pose and a snake-like creature. The overall scene is a rich display of Khmer art and architecture.

Famous around the globe for the magnificent temples and ruins at Angkor, Cambodia has far more to offer. Beautiful islands, terrific rural scenery and plenty of fine places just to put your feet up and watch the river slide by.

# Cambodia



# Banlung



The northern reaches of Cambodia's "Wild East", Banlung delivers on river trips, a crater lake, waterfalls, gems (kinda) and trekking into one of Cambodia's more challenged national parks, where Asian tigers may still roam.

# Banlung



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## LOGISTICS

- Banlung is the most remote provincial capital in Cambodia. It is most commonly reached by bus – pack a book.
- Tree Top Eco Lodge remains our favourite option, but if you're looking for a few more creature comforts, Terres Rouges Lodge will not disappoint.
- While the ethnic minority cemeteries are now all off limits, the waterfalls around Banlung are well worth a look and are best reached by motorbike.
- For the more intrepid, a two- or three-day trekking trip to Virachey National Park remains a highlight of a visit to the province, both for the park itself and to witness firsthand the challenges it faces in a quickly changing Cambodia.

Banlung is the provincial capital of Ratanakiri province, and has grown over the years from a hideously dusty or muddy (depending on the season) truck-stop to a mid-sized (often still dusty or muddy) town. The original capital, Lumphat, was obliterated by bombing during the US War and pretty much all that remains is a roundabout.

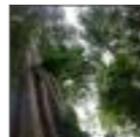
Sadly, loggers have well and truly had their way with Ratanakiri province. While some areas are protected -- notably Yak Lom crater lake and Virachey National Park -- the scars of rapacious over-exploitation can be seen everywhere.

Most travellers tend to stay at least three nights here, exploring the waterfalls and ethnic minority villages and perhaps doing an overnight (or longer) trip into the national park. Bear in mind that tourism is still a developing business here and that things may not always turn out quite as you expect. The makeshift feel to trips around the province add however to its authentic allure.

A good range of places to stay adds to Banlung's allure, and if flights ever start running again, it will regain its popularity as a weekender choice for expats in Phnom Penh. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Cemetery grave marker in riverside forest.*



# Baray Reach Dak

A photograph showing a person from behind, wearing a white t-shirt and brown pants, rowing a boat on a large, calm body of water. The person is using a long wooden paddle. The water is dark blue and reflects the sky. In the background, there are some trees and a clear sky. The overall scene is peaceful and serene.

Only the dip of a wooden paddle breaks the serene stillness of the glassy water out on Baray Reach Dak, also known as the North Baray. With over a million tourists a year visiting the temples of Cambodia's Angkor, you couldn't possibly be further from them here.

# Baray Reach Dak

## LOGISTICS

- You will still need an Angkor Temple Pass in order to do activities at Baray Reach Dak.
- The level of the English skills of the guides here does not yet make communication easy – but you are helping to sustainably support local communities, so bring along a little patience with your sun cream for the tour.
- Tours start at US\$7 for the sunset cruise, through to \$18 for the tour to Neak Poan island.
- All tours commence from the Tour Welcome Centres located at Preah Khan or Krang Kroch (Ta Som).

Baray Reach Dak community tours offers a wholly different perspective on the ancient wonders of Angkor via three guided routes.

What was once part of the complex Angkorian hydraulic system until recently lay dry, having allowed the forest to creep in and place down its roots. Partly as a flood preventative measure, the baray has been slowly filling up, enabling it to return to its former brimming state.

The three tour routes are part of a social enterprise project to provide alternative livelihoods for Phlong and Leang Dai villages and to spread the benefits of tourism, set up with the support of the APSARA National Authority and Australian government.

The first tour takes you through the forest, where you will learn about traditional medicinal uses of various flora and visit a garden nursery, leading on to a purpose-built look-out pavilion to soak up the views of the baray. The second allows you to reach Neak Poan island temple by traditional wooden boat. The third option is a short 20-minute sunset boat ride, making for an ideal way to round off your day's temple touring. [Read more on Travelfish.org](https://www.travelfish.org).



*Transport options are simple.*



# Battambang



Battambang offers plenty of things to see and do, apart from admiring the idyllic countryside. Great hotels and top food and drink options compound the attractions. The town remains quiet, laidback and more traditional than nearby Siem Reap, making for a wonderfully contrasting destination.

# Battambang



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Battambang is easily reached by bus from both Siem Reap and Phnom Penh.
- In wet season the boat trip from Siem Reap to Battambang can be stunning, but bear in mind the boats can be overloaded.
- Backpackers would be well advised to head straight to Here Be Dragons, while La Villa and Bambu are ideal for those with thicker wallets.
- Aside from visiting the outlying temples and taking a ride on a nori, make sure you catch Battambang's famous circus – Phare Ponleu Selpak. And consider doing a cooking class. Vannak at Smokin' Pot remains our favourite.

Set across the banks of the Sangker River, the bulk of Battambang's restaurants, hotels and attractions are to the west. The town is a pleasant place to explore for a day or two on foot and forms a perfect base for trips into the surrounding area, where there's plenty more to see and do.

Best known for its Angkor-period ruins at Ek Phnom and Phnom Banan, there's also Phnom Sampeau, the site of the local “killing fields”.

Ride the nori or bamboo train; check out the circus; do some wine tasting; grab a cooking class; see some rice-paper making, and otherwise enjoy the quintessentially Khmer scenery around the town via river or motorbike -- rural Battambang is attractive precisely because it doesn't have too many attractions.

Big-ticket attractions aside, what often swings it for Battambang is the laidback, sleepy feel to the place. It's an attractive town in a rundown kind of way with a few colonial shopfronts and pretty tree-lined streets. Spend an evening by the riverfront munching away on fried bugs and other critters and no doubt you'll be sold too. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Children caress decapitated statues.*



# Kampot



Kampot is both somnolent and pretty, in a rundown kind of way. Best known for its pepper (which is truly excellent), the town sits on the east bank of the Kampot River and enjoys spectacular views across to Bokor and Elephant Mountains. We like Kampot. A lot.

# Kampot



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- There are several buses a day between Phnom Penh and Kampot with the around 4 hour trip costing \$6. A taxi will costs \$40 and take around 3 hours.
- Travellers will like the Magic Sponge which is a quirkily decorated former bank while midrange travellers should aim for La Java Bleue or The Columns.
- Ask any expat for a Kampot eating experience, and they'll recommend Rusty Keyhole, the most popular restaurant on riverside which overflows nightly onto the pavement. We agree.
- The 'Secret Lake', which is far too big to be a secret, makes for a pleasant day trip.

Sleepy Kampot was once a trading centre and until the establishment of a deep sea port at Sihanoukville in the 1950s, it was Cambodia's primary port. A smattering of small fishing boats can still be seen unloading every morning a short walk south of the main town on the dirt road parallel to the river.

Pepper plantations as well as a few low-key sites can be visited from town, which also forms an ideal base for trips up to jungle-clad Bokor, a highlight of any visit to the Cambodian coast. Atop Bokor are a church and a casino, remnants from Cambodia's French colonial period.

Plenty of villas and old shopfront trading houses, especially along the river road, make it a pleasant area to wander through. The Old Market, long a derelict landmark, has recently been revitalised with shops and eateries and rumours abound about plans for the empty Fish Market on the riverfront.

Further afield, those with an explorer's tilt can discover some caves just off the road to Kep, the 'Secret Lake', some salt fields and a small waterfall. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Sunset over Bokor mountain.*



# Koh Rong Samloem



Koh Rong Samloem is just two hours by boat from Sihanoukville but feels a world away. The island is owned by the Cambodian navy and is yet to be sold, as have with most of its neighbours – word is that they're saving the best for last.

# Koh Rong Samloem



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Koh Rong Samloem is two hours from Sihanoukville by daily ferry, weather allowing.
- Saracen Bay Resort and the very aptly named Lazy Beach are our two favourite places to stay. In high season, making a reservation in advance is a very good idea.
- When the beach gets just too lazy, head off into the jungle to see the interior of the island, and spot a monkey or hornbill.
- There are no ATMs on Koh Rong Samloem, so be sure to bring enough cash with you – allow for a few extra days beyond what you expect to stay.

The western side of Cambodia's Koh Rong Samloem has three gorgeous yellow sand beaches, which are perfect for watching the deep pink sunsets every evening. On the eastern side is heart-shaped Saracen Bay, and the beaches on this side are an eye-blinding white, with a fast-developing choice of accommodation.

At the northern top of the island is a small fishing village called M'Pai Bei, or 23 in Khmer. Marine Conservation Cambodia, a volunteer-funded ecotourism project, is based here and offers volunteering opportunities to visitors such as marine conservation. Because of their strong relationship with the organisation, Village 23 is a particularly friendly place for tourists to visit and see life in a rural fishing village.

If volunteering isn't your thing, snorkelling and diving opportunities abound around the island.

Other activities on include trekking – the centre of the island is mostly jungle – and fishing the old-fashioned way, with a line and hook. Koh Rong Samloem has enough options to keep everyone happy. The only challenge will be deciding which part of the island to stay on. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*You can park your boat here.*



# Less visited Phnom Kulen



Moss-swathed temples ensconced in jungle are waiting to be found on Phnom Kulen, “Mountain of the Lychees”. The low-lying plateau draws crowds to its cooling cascades, river carvings and prominent hilltop pagoda. Yet those with a taste for adventure can explore further.

# Less visited Phnom Kulen

## LOGISTICS

- Phnom Kulen is around 40 kilometres from Siem Reap in western Cambodia.
- Allow about four hours to take in the lesser visited aspects of Phnom Kulen by motorbike.
- While not essential, getting a guide along with a motorbike driver is recommended to get the most out of the tour. Be sure to check they're taking you off the trail!
- Expect to pay around US\$15 per person for a driver. You'll also need to pay Phnom Kulen's pricey \$20 admission.

If you ever wondered how much a Honda Dream motorbike can really cope with, exploring the reaches of Phnom Kulen is the test. Crossing streams, bouncing, bumping and battering your way across the sandstone plateau is a fun journey, if not the most comfortable.

The nearest, and most visited, of the lesser visited sites is Srah Damrei, meaning “Elephant Pond”. Continuing on you reach the “bat cave”. After you've explored inside, climb up above to reach just one of the many Kulen viewpoints.

The temples crumbling on Kulen include Aran Rung Chen and Pa Oung; it's true that none are as impressive as those found in the central Angkor complex, but they offer a charm of their own in their dilapidated states, offering the closest you'll get to a sense of first-time discovery.

A motorbike tour also typically encompasses a stop at the modern cliff-top pagoda Wat Preaek Krau, another great viewpoint, before finishing off at a waterfall where you might also just have time to take a quick dip, before the two-hour journey back to Siem Reap town. [Read more on \*TravelFish.org\*.](#)



*There be ruins. Look closely.*

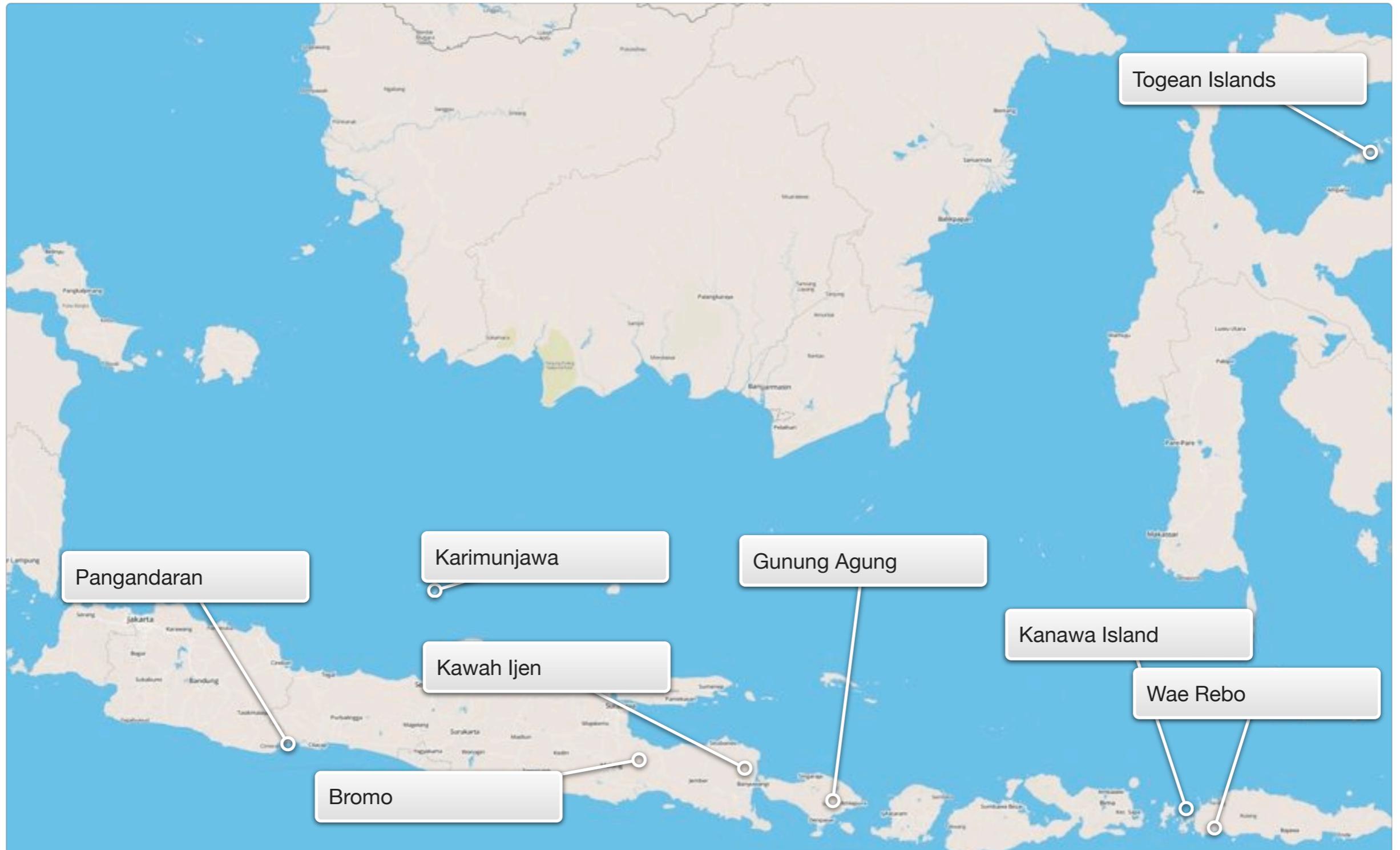


# Indonesia



Climb a volcano then relax on a beach. Repeat this procedure as you work your way slowly across one of the world's most magnificent archipelagoes.

# Indonesia



# Gunung Agung



Bali's most revered peak, Gunung Agung is the tallest peak on the island and the most climbed volcano in Indonesia. That's not to say it is easy. For some an annual ritual, for others climbing Agung is a once in a lifetime experience.

# Gunung Agung

## LOGISTICS

- Agung's absolute peak is 3,031 metres above sea level, though most trek to the crater rim at an altitude of 2,866 metres.
- The climb should take 4 to 6 hours depending on your level of fitness and conditions. Many commence at 1am to reach the summit for dawn.
- While taking a guide is not compulsory, it is a very good idea, particularly for first-time climbers. We highly recommend Nyoman (T: 0852 3854 8412).
- The gorgeous rice field village of Sidemen, roughly one hour from the trekking start point, is the best launching point for the climb.

Just about every house and building on Bali has a shrine for daily offerings to revered Gunung Agung, the holiest mountain on the island. Treat it with the respect it deserves.

The peak has two primary trekking routes. The more popular leaves from Pura Pasar Agung and leads to the crater rim. The less popular and apparently even more challenging route leaves from Pura Besakih and leads right to the absolute summit.

The summit offers complete 360 degree views of Bali, while the crater rim has primarily views of south and eastern Bali. On the day of our climb there were about 30 people at the crater rim and just four at the summit.

Some of the climb is extremely steep. While you're climbing up at night-time it is difficult to imagine just how steep the surrounds are. In daylight, on the way down, the steepness of the slope is obvious. If you have serious troubles with heights, this is not for you.

It sounds ridiculous, but on the way down, the walk is particularly punishing on your toes. By cutting your toenails short you will avoid some of the worst of the pain. [Read more on Travelfish.org](https://www.travelfish.org).



*Frosty leaves on the way back down after my first (failed) ascent.*



# Gunung Bromo



Indonesia's Gunung Bromo is the jewel in the crown of East Java's attractions and ranks as one of Southeast Asia's premier natural wonders.

# Gunung Bromo

## LOGISTICS

- Bromo is around 40 kilometres from the dusty town of Probolinggo and more or less due east of Malang.
- Most travellers visit the area to get up before dawn to catch sunrise over the stunning moon-like Tengger Caldera, which contains the active Gunung Bromo among a cluster of other volcanoes.
- Bring all the cash you need. As well, be aware that medical facilities are rudimentary should you sprain an ankle or worse.
- While most opt for a jeep tour, you can walk to a number of the highlights.

Gunung Bromo is contained within the enormous Tengger Caldera, a true spectacle in itself. When you approach you'll most likely be dropped at the Gunung Penanjakan parking area where you commence the ascent of the mountain which forms part of the caldera wall.

After a steep 45 minute walk, most visitors choose to stop at what is commonly referred to as viewpoint #2, approximately 200 metres below viewpoint #1, which is the peak of Gunung Penanjakan. Both vantage points offer stunning sunrise views of the caldera with Gunung Batok in the foreground, Gunung Bromo immediately behind it and towering Gunung Semeru in the far distance, completing an astonishing scene.

After sunrise, visitors descend into the caldera to a parking area a kilometre from Bromo itself, where countless men with horses offer rides to the top. Horses only travel as far as the 233-step staircase on the side of Bromo, where a final punishing push is required.

From the metre-wide path at the top of Bromo you can see into an abyss that seemingly continues on into the centre of the earth. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Now that is a caldera.*



# Kanawa Island



Kanawa Island boasts the best off-the-beach snorkelling we've ever seen. Do you need more convincing? You can walk around the island in a few hours and take a boat trip to snorkel with manta rays then see Komodo dragons up close. Best of all, it's just a couple of hours from Bali.

# Kanawa Island

## LOGISTICS

- Kanawa Island sits just outside the border of Komodo National Park and is around an hour from Labuan Bajo on Flores by boat. Regular flights of just over an hour run between Labuan Bajo and Bali – Garuda has just started this route.
- There is just one place to stay on Kanawa and the standard of bungalows varies. Electricity is very limited with no fan at night. Bring a battery operated fan if you can – it gets very hot.
- A series of viewpoints dot the top of the island, making for excellent sunset spots. Count how many goats you see.
- The snorkelling off the beach is superb.

Kanawa Island is a bit of a go-to location for backpackers and flashpackers looking for some downtime during their travels through Indonesia.

It's surrounded by a reef in extremely good condition that boasts an impressive range of sea life, from soft coral through to sting rays, sharks and turtles. The reef is easy swimming distance from the beach, which itself is also very attractive, with ample shade, and you're never too far from the sole restaurant on the island.

It is possible to walk all the way around the island or you can walk over the top of the island and down onto the back beach to continue on your way. The rustic but photogenic pier was destroyed (along with some of the reef) by a storm in early 2013, but a new pier was built and we've been told the reef is showing encouraging signs of regeneration.

A series of viewpoints can be reached by a relatively easy climb and the views, especially at sunset, will take your breath away. Be sure to follow the trail all the way to the simple hut on the peak -- it's absolutely lovely. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*The view over Kanawa from the viewpoint.*



# Karimunjawa



Indonesia's Karimunjawa Islands are an idyllic group of 27 tropical islands surrounded by aquamarine water and coral reefs located approximately 120 kilometres north of Semarang in Central Java. Foreigners are infrequent visitors, but don't take that to mean you shouldn't go.

# Karimunjawa Islands

## LOGISTICS

- The islands are approximately 120 kilometres north of Semarang and 90 kilometres north of Jepara.
- There is an ATM and internet access in the main town of Karimunjawa.
- Most of the accommodation on the main island is homestay style, where you'll be staying with a local family.
- Backpackers will be happy with Puri Karimun, flashpackers with Blue Laguna Inn, and those looking for something a little fancier may want to look at Nirvana Laut.
- Only three or four boats ply the waters to the islands per week. Schedules are subject to weather conditions.

By far the most popular activity to engage in when coming to the Karimunjawa Islands is island hopping. Hiring a boat from a fisherman and heading out to the islands to explore, snorkel and take photos of the magnificent beaches and crystal clear water is a fantastic experience.

The outlying islands really are incredible and there is some great snorkelling and diving to be had, but be aware that many of the reefs suffer from coral bleaching, meaning of course that much of their colour has disappeared.

Boats can be hired through your guesthouse or at the dock directly for around 300,000 rupiah for a five-hour journey to a few islands. The prices are totally flexible and you may end up paying more or less depending on a range of factors, including whether it's peak season and how many passengers you wish to transport. Snorkelling gear can usually be organised by the boat captain for an additional 30,000 rupiah per person.

You won't want to be on too tight a schedule here, as boat services can be erratic when the weather is bad. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Typical beach scene.*



# Kawah Ijen



Kawah Ijen is famous for its acidic aquamarine lake and its sulphur mining industry. Witnessing this display of human strength and perseverance in the face of incredibly hostile conditions within a moonscape environment can be a humbling experience.

# Kawah Ijen

## LOGISTICS

- Formed by a series of eruptions some 3,500 years ago, Kawah Ijen is a massive volcanic crater located on a plateau between three towering volcanoes towards the very eastern tip of Java.
- Most travellers stay at Banyuwangi to get here, but accommodation is also available at Bondowoso and Pos Paltuding.
- Kawah Ijen is approached by hired 4WD or ojek.
- There is no need to arrive at Ijen at sunrise as the clouds don't really roll in until about midday, at which time views of the surrounding area may be obscured.

The main reason people come to Kawah Ijen is to witness the amazing strength of the 400 or so men who haul lumps of sulphur from the base of this crater, over the lip and down again to waiting trucks.

The men of Kawah Ijen walk three kilometres and 400 vertical metres up to the crater lip from the car park at Pos Paltuding. From the crater lip, the workers descend into the crater and end up at an acidic aquamarine crater lake some 300 metres below, where big pipes funnel sulphuric gases so that water can be used to cool it down and thus solidify it.

The lumps of solid sulphur are then loaded into the workers' bamboo baskets, at which time the journey back up to the crater lip commences. The baskets weigh anywhere between 50 and 115 kilograms; respiratory ailments among the men are common.

Despite the signs forbidding entry to the crater, men going to pick up sulphur will offer to take you right into the crater. Note the fumes at times are overwhelming, but with an experienced guide, it is somewhat safer, especially when the wind changes direction and you are enveloped in sulphuric gases. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



Carrying sulphur.



# Pangandaran



Pangandaran is the premiere beachside destination for residents of West Java and is often touted as the local alternative to Bali -- the place you go if you can't afford to get to Bali.

# Pangandaran



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Pangandaran is located on a thin peninsular seven hours from Bandung and 10 hours from Jakarta, dependent on traffic.
- The bus station is a short walk from the majority of the guesthouses foreign tourists will choose to stay in, but a becak will set you back just 10,000 rupiah if you can't be bothered walking or if it's raining.
- Backpackers should try Bamboo House or Rinjani Homestay, while flashpackers will be comfortable at the Century Hotel.
- You'll find ATMs and plenty of WiFi in Pangandaran.

Pangandaran's waves are the key reason it's on the foreign tourist map in the first place, with surfers from Australia coming here for years. You'll also find them up the road at Batu Karas and further afield in villages so small that regular accommodation isn't available.

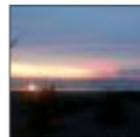
But aside from the waves, Pangandaran beach is a great place to relax and sunbathe, have a drink in one of the many beachside bars and to have a ride on one of the four-wheel motorbikes that are for rent. The feel is very local, but refreshingly so with still enough foreign visitors to ensure that Western food is available and accommodation with Western standards is present.

The Pangandaran peninsula has a surf beach on one side called the West Beach or Pantai Barat; it's a dark-yellow coloured crescent that extends as far as the eye can see, with a constant stream of surfable waves crashing into the shoreline.

A sea wall on the other side is called East Beach or Pantai Timur, though it's not really a beach -- a deadly tsunami ripped through here in 2006, washing away what was here. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*A busy day at the beach.*



# Wae Rebo



The Manggarai village of Wae Rebo, some 108 kilometres from Labuan Bajo, is nestled in the cloud forests of western Flores and centres around seven cone-shaped traditional houses, which function as a remarkable piece of Flores' living history.

# Wae Rebo

## LOGISTICS

- Wae Rebo is generally explored over the course of almost three days: one day for the steep car ride to the town of Denge, which serves as the trailhead, one day to trek up and spend the day and night with the locals at the village of Wae Rebo, and one half day to have breakfast in Wae Rebo and make the much easier walk down.
- A few hundred tourists, largely from Indonesia and Europe, make the trek here every year – but odds are good you'll have the place to yourself, especially in the low season, which is really everything but June, July and August.

The trek to Wae Rebo is about seven kilometres long and is very decidedly uphill, meaning that this is an endeavour best left to the physically fit. Think twice about bringing kids along, as the trail is steep and a bit hard to follow, and often quite slippery when rain falls. And try not to be discouraged as friendly Wae Rebo natives in their late seventies sprint past you on the trail, barefoot, and carrying huge loads on their heads.

You'll be rewarded with amazing views of the sea below and perfectly triangular Gunung Inerie, as well as diverse jungle foliage and frequent sightings of tropical butterflies, birds and monkeys. Nearer to Wae Rebo, you can see forest plantings of cassava, taro, coffee and cacao beans in the misty cloud forest surrounding the village.

Be sure to use sunscreen and bring plenty of water and rain gear -- it's often damp here. Remember not to take photos of Wae Rebo before you approach. All visitors need to undergo a welcoming ceremony at the main drumhouse to placate the spirits before they can start snapping away. It's a basic politeness that the locals will appreciate you following. [Read more on Travelfish.org](https://www.travelfish.org).



*Wood collectors.*



# Togean Islands



Famous for both their difficulty to reach and their excellent diving, the Togeans comprise seven primary islands situated near the centre of a global hotspot of biodiversity known as the Coral Triangle.

# Togean Islands

## LOGISTICS

- The Togeans lie in the Tomini Sea towards the northern reaches of Indonesia's Sulawesi.
- Most ferries leave from Gorontalo in the north or Ampana in the south. Ferries do not run daily and all schedules are subject to weather.
- There are six main islands in the archipelago and travel between them is generally by outrigger or small ferry.
- There are no ATMs.
- All accommodation is full board. Backpackers will enjoy Poya Lisa and Sifa Cottage, while Island Retreat and Fadhila are both very comfortable midrange options.

The Togean -- or Togian -- Islands are an archipelago in the southeast region of the Tomini Sea in northern Sulawesi. Home to a great number of rare marine and terrestrial species, most tourists who come here are divers or snorkellers hoping to see some of the world's best marine life in relatively unspoiled surroundings.

While primarily a diving destination, the islands also offer superior snorkelling conditions and lend themselves to a generally lazy few days on the beautiful beaches. Diving highlights include a sunken World War II bomber and spectacular reef drops of hundreds of metres, while snorkellers will enjoy the atoll tops for easy, low current, snorkelling. Travellers busy themselves with island-hopping, visiting Jellyfish Lake or just by swinging in a hammock.

With calm waters, this can be a good option for families, but bear in mind the transport is uncomfortable, the accommodation leans towards the basic and the food -- fish, fish and perhaps some more fish -- can get a little repetitive. The Togeans' high season is July and August, when making a reservation is almost essential. Outside of then, just showing up is probably safe to try. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*At Hotel California.*

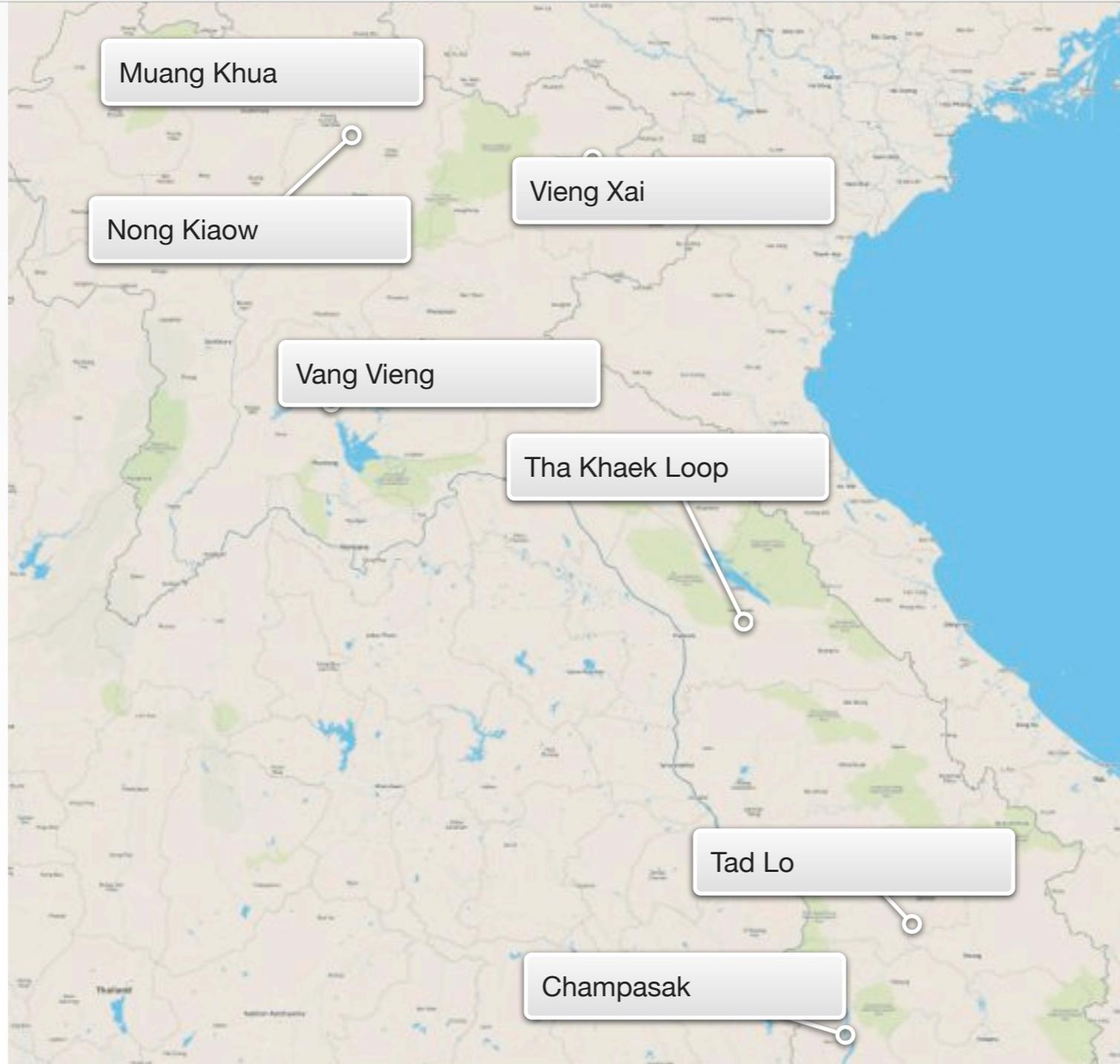


# Laos



Best known for the romantic Luang Prabang, for the traveller willing to make the effort to get a little off the main trail, Laos reveals a rich heritage and some fabulous spots to take a holiday from a holiday.

# Laos



# Champasak & Wat Phu



On the western bank of the Mekong sits the Lao town of Champasak. The nearby Khmer-period ruins of Wat Phu were granted UNESCO World Heritage status in 2001, but aside from a large carpark and a museum, the ruins are largely as they've been for centuries.

# Champasak & Wat Phu

## LOGISTICS

- Champasak is around 40 kilometres south of Pakse in Southern Laos, while Wat Phu is a further 10 kilometres to the southwest.
- Pakse has international flights to Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Bangkok along with domestic connections to Vientiane and Luang Prabang.
- Backpackers should try Khamphouy Guesthouse while flashpackers should enjoy the Inthira Hotel.
- The boat to Pakse operates on an on-again, off-again basis. Most arrive by minivan or tuk tuk. There are minivan connections onwards to the beautiful 4,000 islands.

Well worn and heavily weathered, Wat Phu is the most important Khmer site in Laos. An attractive but rather small affair, what Wat Phu lacks in size and grandeur it more than makes up for with charm and atmosphere.

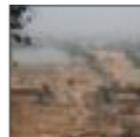
Overshadowed by Phu Pasak and littered with frangipani, Wat Phu's somewhat rambling, almost teetering appearance hides its importance. The site predates many of the finds in Angkor and Thailand and if you're lucky enough to have an uncrowded early morning or late afternoon to yourself, the whole place has a bit of a lost city feel to it.

The ruins draw a steady crowd of daytrippers from Pakse and further afield, but with Champasak's handful of colonial mansions, typical Chinese shopfronts and pretty wooden houses, try to allow for at least an overnight stay.

Along the solitary main road water buffaloes and wandering geese are more common sights than cars and buses, and the riverfront with its smattering of small restaurants and hammock-strewn cafes creates an ideal getaway from the midday heat. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*At the base of Wat Phu.*



# Muang Khua



The northern Lao town of Muang Khua sits on the bank of the river Nam Ou, near the mouth of the Nam Phak. It's a beautiful, peaceful spot halfway up the river between Nong Kiaow and Hat Sa (for Phongsali) in northern Laos.

# Muang Khua

## LOGISTICS

- Muang Khua has daily bus connections to the far larger Lao town of Udomxai along with minivans to Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam.
- Note that if you are heading to Vietnam, you must already have a visa in your passport. There is no visa on arrival.
- There is at least one ATM in Muang Khua along with internet access at some of the guesthouses.
- Nam Ou Guesthouse remains the backpacker favourite, overlooking the Nam Ou. Off the river, the Chalernsouk is a solid option.

Riverside Muang Khua is rarely visited as a destination in its own right, but treated rather as a half-way house for travellers journeying by boat from Nong Kiaow in the south, remote Hat Sa in the north or over the border to Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam. While few travellers linger longer than a night or two, the town is slowly developing into a true chilled-out traveller destination.

For those interested in trekking, the region is a great place to explore for a few days. The untouched and rarely visited mountains were heavily bombed during the US war as the US believed there to be significant Pathet Lao activity in the area -- today all that remain are scattered villages. Expect terrific scenery coupled with a bit of a rough and ready trekking experience.

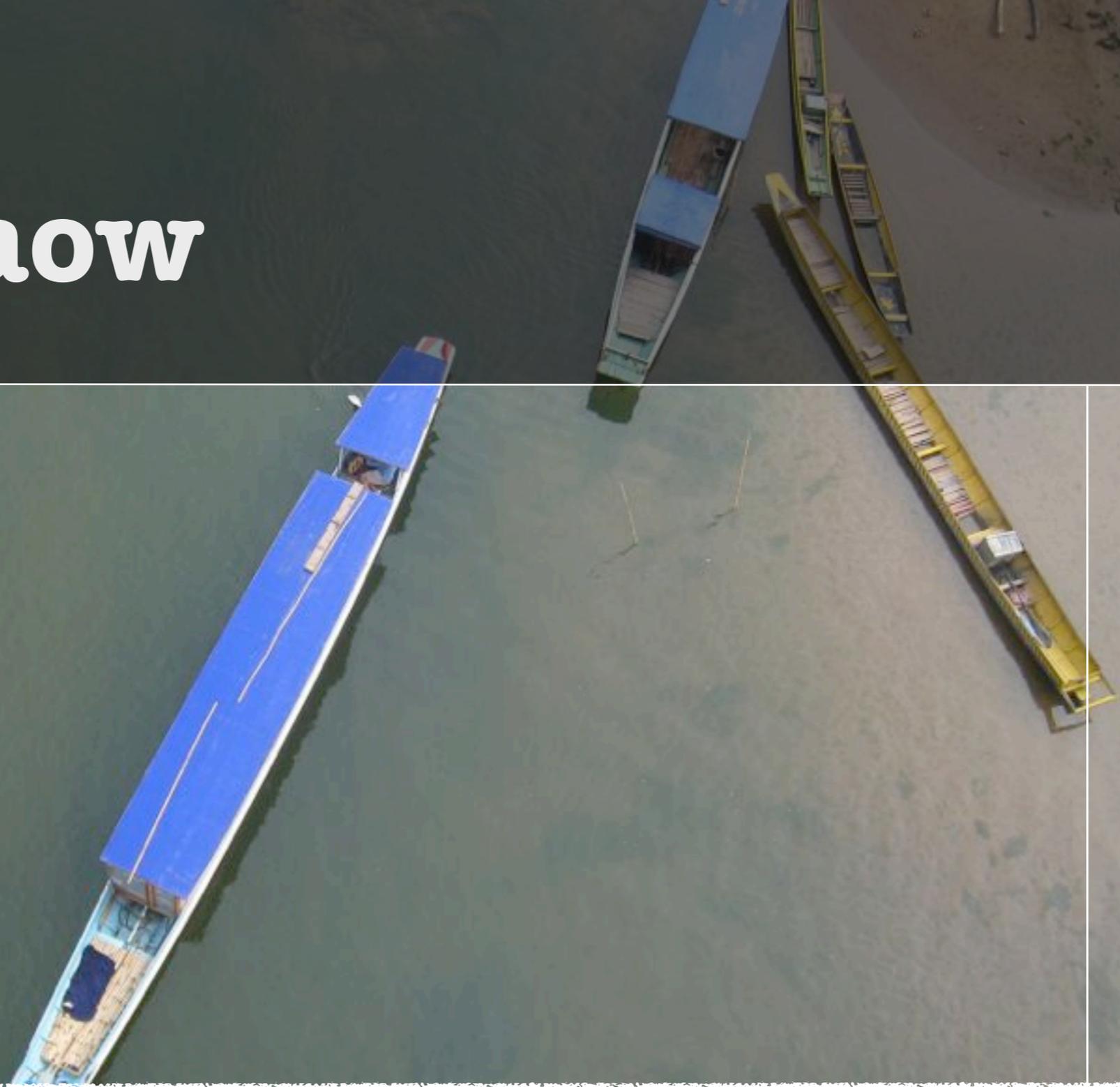
Stick around and wander the small side alleys, or trek through the mountains, and you may discover a side to Muang Khua not easily visible at first glance. This is a great place to go if you want to step off the road well travelled, without going too far off the track. [Read more on Travefish.org.](#)



*Muang Khua surrounds, circa 2005.*



# Nong Kiaow



A small town on the banks of the Nam Ou River, Nong Kiaow (also spelt Nong Khiaw) boasts a gorgeous backdrop of imposing limestone mountains, picturesque river views and genuine local colour.

# Nong Kiaow

## LOGISTICS

- Nong Kiaow sits on the Nam Ou, roughly halfway between Luang Prabang to the south and Hat Sa to the north.
- While it used to be possible to travel by boat between Nong Kiaow and Luang Prabang, this is no longer possible due to dam construction. Boats still do run (for now) north to Muang Ngoi and Muang Khua.
- There are ATMs in Nong Kiaow and internet (both WiFi and 3G) are readily available.
- Sunset Guesthouse is popular with budget travellers while flashpackers and families often go for Nong Kiaow Riverside. There are plenty of other places to choose from in Nong Kiaow.

Sometimes referred to as Muang Ngoi Mai, Nong Kiaow is often confused with Muang Ngoi, a smaller town an hour's boat ride upriver.

Both towns are very popular with backpackers, and new riverside bungalows, tourist-friendly restaurants and travel agencies keep being added to accommodate them.

Nong Kiaow is at a crossroads between maintaining its traditional ways and fully embracing tourism. Houses with thatched bamboo walls now have satellite dishes and many of the town's residents are abandoning farming and fishing for the fast money of tourism.

Some visitors have compared Nong Kiaow to Vang Vieng; yes, you can go tubing here too and there is a river, but the similarities stop there. For now, Nong Kiaow remains one of the most laidback places in Laos.

There are ample opportunities for trekking, caving and rock-climbing, boat trips and cycling, but for many this is just a great place to take a holiday from a holiday. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*A cave outside town.*



# Tad Lo



Hidden away off the main road in Southern Laos' Salavan province, Tad Lo's riverside shacks and bounty of waterfalls are something of a budget travellers' paradise.

# Tad Lo

## LOGISTICS

- Any Salavan-bound bus from Pakse will pass by Tad Lo. Many though choose to rent a scooter in Pakse and ride out themselves.
- Palamei Guesthouse and Tim Guesthouse are the two most popular spots to stay in town. Those looking for more creature comforts should head to Tadlo Lodge.
- There's more than just waterfalls. You can go elephant riding and there are some basic trekking opportunities available in the area. Many though just relax with a book.
- Internet is available in Tad Lo but there are no ATMs.

Tad Lo is really a series of three waterfalls -- Tad Suong, Tad Lo and Tad Hang -- around which most of the accommodation is grouped, in the village of Ban Saenvang.

Tad Hang is the first set of falls you'll see when you arrive -- they are the smallest and gentlest of the three, but provide the best opportunity for taking a dip.

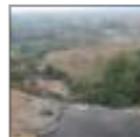
Tad Lo itself is reached by crossing the bridge over to the Saise Resort and following the road uphill and around to an abandoned guesthouse. From here, the base of the falls can be reached on foot and you can swim in a massive pool at its base -- a little bit like a whirlpool but exhilarating nonetheless. The massive granite wall over which the waters spill is definitely worth seeing, even if you don't go for a swim.

Tad Suong, about 10 kilometres from town, is the best of the falls, but mainly in the wet season when it is in full flow. The path to the breathtaking falls lets out at the top, and oh boy, are you at the top.

Excellent budget accommodation here makes Tad Lo the kind of place you plan to spend a day or two but end up staying much longer. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*One of Tad Lo's many falls.*



# The Tha Khaek Loop



The Tha Khaek or Konglor Loop is a 500 kilometre-long motorcycle journey starting and ending in Tha Khaek in Southern Laos, which takes in the stunning limestone scenery of Khammuan province, including the seven-kilometre long Konglor cave.

# The Tha Khaek Loop

## LOGISTICS

- Most people do the loop in three to five days. A good rule of thumb is: three days is a rush, four days is relaxing and five days is for the extended loop.
- In years gone by, almost the entire 500-kilometre journey was on dirt roads, but recent road-paving projects have made almost the whole journey now rather easy to navigate by motorbike.
- Most do the Loop in an anti-clockwise direction, with the route being Tha Khaek, Mahaxay, Nakai, Thalang, Lak Xao, Na Hin, Konglor Cave, Vieng Kham and back to Tha Khaek.
- Bring enough money with you.

The Tha Khaek loop takes in the beautiful limestone scenery of Khammuan province, remote villages and many caves, of which the highlight is Konglor, a seven-kilometre long cave which has a large river running right through the middle of it.

The Konglor cave is actually a portion of the Hin Boun River that has worked its way, over some vast period of geological time, through just over seven kilometres of solid rock. It's a truly awesome experience, from which almost no one ever walks away disappointed. The river is wide and the ceiling of the cave reaches well over 50 metres above the floor in some parts creating quite a humbling experience.

Bring a good flashlight with fresh batteries, and prepare to get at least your feet wet. It takes about an hour to get through the cave. The entrance on the other side lets out 3 kilometres from Ban Natan, where homestays are available if you'd like to spend the night. But, typically, after a break on the other side, you get back in the boat and do the return.

There are plenty of places to stay and other highlights along the loop route itself. [Read more on Travefish.org.](#)



*Into the cave we go.*



# Vang Vieng



Situated midway between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng has become the pit stop of Laos. Surrounded by splendid karst scenery and bursting with activities such as caving and tubing down the river, many travellers extend their stay here far longer than planned.

# Vang Vieng



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Over the past few years true hostels have appeared and even though their bunks cost nearly the same as a fan room, are a big hit with the younger crowd – Central Backpackers is the pick of the bunch. Vang Vieng Organic Farm is a great out of town choice.
- More upscale places are located by the river, with Villa Vang Vieng Riverside a decent choice.
- BCEL ATMs are scattered throughout town and WiFi is readily available in guesthouses and restaurants.
- If you've been put off Vang Vieng by the tales of heavy partying in the past, do rest assured that those days are over.

Until recently, Vang Vieng was infamous for its happy pizza, lao lao buckets and Friends episodes, but thanks to government intervention, that's mostly gone now as the town strives to reinvent itself.

Today, the debauched party scene has moved on and the true beauty of the area is once again being appreciated -- and is being well and truly explored. Welcome to the laidback and peaceful vibe of Vang Vieng.

The gorgeous Nam Song river and the magnificent karst mountains lining it are the top shelf attractions, but there's plenty more to do -- and see. For action and adventure, there are caves to explore, trekking, kayaking and rafting trips and rock climbing. Or, just chill out, rent an inner tube and float down the Nam Song basking in the beauty of the countryside, an activity for everyone these days.

The imposing limestone massifs rise up out of the land and run for kilometres, framing the rice fields and lazy river. Though stunning at any hour, the mountains are particularly beautiful with the golden pink glow of sunset behind them, the perfect time to sit and have a drink at one of the still remaining riverside restaurants. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*One way across the river.*



# Vieng Xai



During the Secret War, Vieng Xai was the Pathet Lao's seat of command. Set among beautiful karst limestone mountains that rise out of the rice fields like hulking monoliths, these caves are the major reason for visiting.

# Vieng Xai

## LOGISTICS

- Vieng Xai is about an hour by songthaew from Sam Neua, the capital of Hua Phan province in northern Laos.
- Naxay 2 Guesthouse is about the best deal in town.
- Be sure to drop by Sabaidee Odisha restaurant – the English speaking owner is a great source of information.
- Eight caves are currently open to the public, though a number more may open in the future.
- Vieng Xai has both an ATM and 3G internet coverage.

Vieng Xai's caves are a well-preserved and fascinating history lesson of the war in Laos. Ten large caves and many more minor caves were used during the war to hide production, materials and people, with one of the largest housing up to 2,000 soldiers.

There were caves for living quarters, markets, printing presses, hospitals and government bureaucracies. They are well preserved and little work has been done since they received heavy usage during the war years of 1964-1975.

The caves themselves were used during the daily heavy aerial bombardment, but once the aerial onslaught finished in 1973, houses were built outside the various leaders' caves, which were then used to command the final stages of battle against the Royal Laos/Hmong forces.

Until relatively recently, these caves remained secret and the Lao government didn't acknowledge their existence. Recent changes however have meant the caves are now a tourist attraction and are a vital source of revenue in the province. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Hilltop viewpoint.*

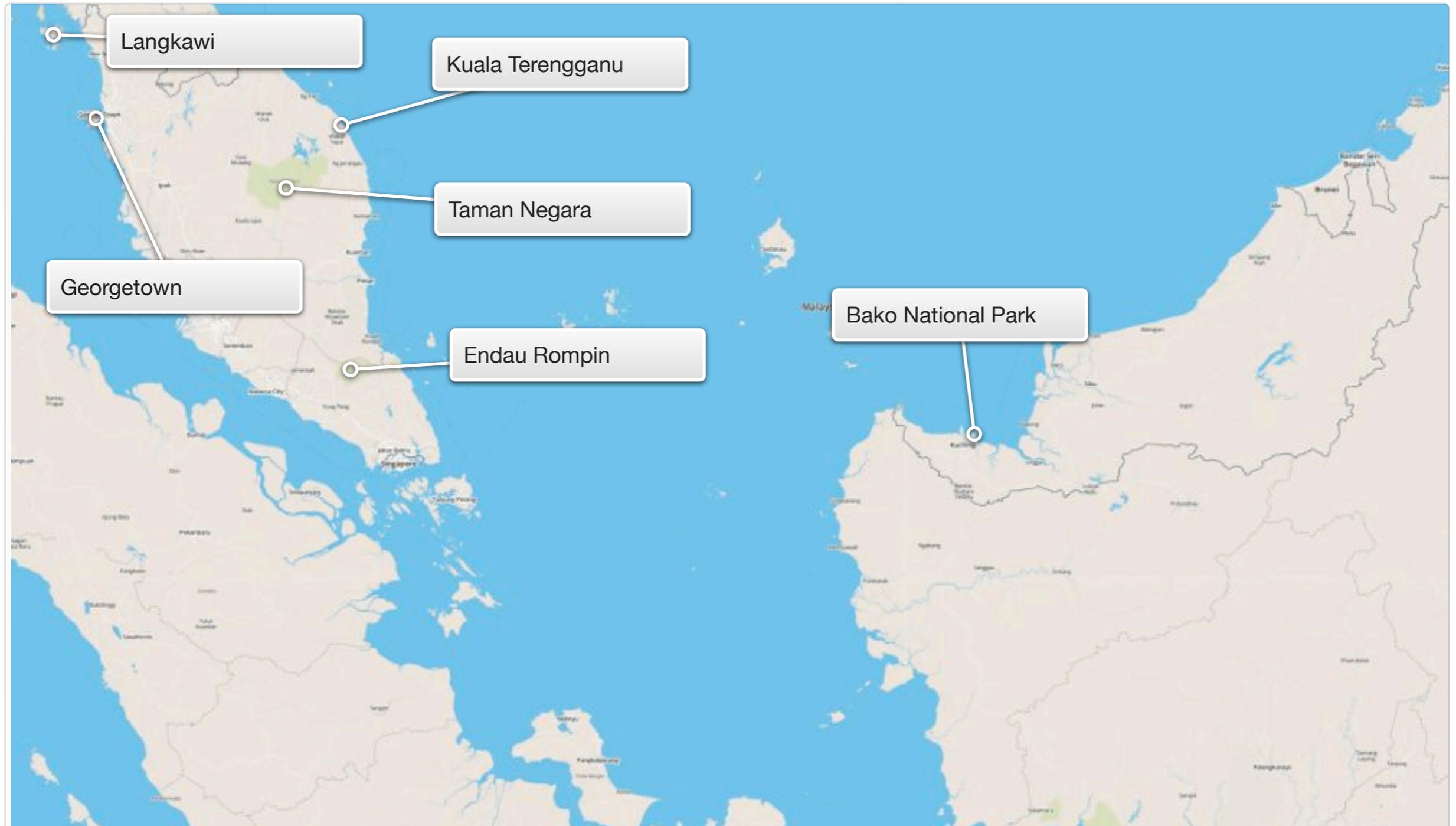


# Malaysia

A collage of Malaysian food items. The top left shows a bowl of orange soup with a blue and white patterned rim. The top right shows a glass of brown beverage. The bottom right shows a plate of fried dumplings with a blue and white patterned rim.

Straddling the South China Sea, Malaysia delivers an eclectic mix ranging from beach resorts and street food to impressive national parks and thriving ethnic Chinese districts. Oh, and then there is the food...

# Malaysia



# Bako National Park



Bako National Park is one of Sarawak's unsung heroes; it's not as publicised as Gunung Mulu National Park and not nearly as organised in terms of activities but in our opinion it's much more of a real rainforest experience.

# Bako National Park

## LOGISTICS

- Facilities at Bako are very limited and it is often cut off from the mainland during low tide, so be sure to bring a comprehensive medical kit. Remember to bring lots of water and snacks on treks!
- Bako is reached by bus from Kuching to Bako pier, from where you then need to charter a boat to the park.
- Our favourite walk in terms of pay off at the end is the Pandan Kecil Trail. It's about two hours to walk one way and the end of the trail leads to a beach.
- Among the animals that may be seen at Bako are proboscis monkeys, long-tailed macaques, silver-leafed langurs, monitor lizards, wild boar and mouse deer.

Bako lays claim to being the oldest national park in Sarawak, having been founded in 1957, and it's also the smallest. Situated on an island, it's reachable by a 20-minute boat ride.

The park's remote location adds to the sense of adventure one feels when stepping onshore. Its island location and early transition into a national park means that wildlife has flourished without poaching or hunting, making Bako one of the best places to see wildlife without having to trek too far.

Bako hosts a variety of ecosystems, from rainforest to scrubland, and moreover it has some truly beautiful beaches that can only be reached by either boat or trekking.

It is possible to do Bako as a daytrip out of Kuching but then you'd be missing out on staying out in the jungle and the brilliant sunset vistas that can be had while eating from the park cafe.

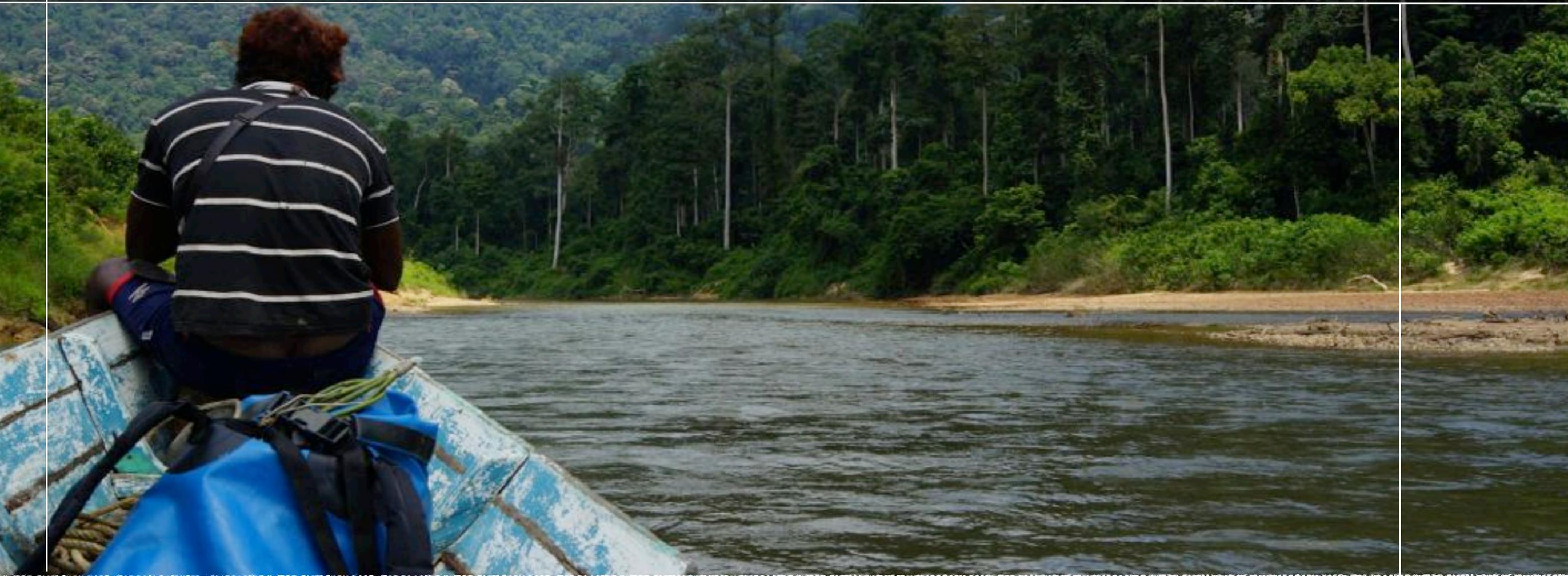
So do yourself a favour and book at least one night in the inexpensive park accommodation. [Read more on Travefish.org.](#)



*Natural pavers.*



# Endau Rompin



Endau Rompin is home to some of Malaysia's most endangered animals like the Malayan tiger and Sumatran rhinoceros. Of course, you're more likely to run into the Sultan of Johor on the hiking trails than a rhino, but it's worth the trip to have the pristine jungle all to yourself.

# Endau Rompin National Park

## LOGISTICS

- The park is named for the two major rivers that run through its boundaries – the Endau River in Johor and Rompin River in Pahang.
- During the rainy season from November to February the roads are impassable and the park basically shuts down.
- As the park is hours from civilisation, be sure to pack bring everything you might need, including insect repellent, leech socks and any medications.
- The fact that Endau Rompin is a real pain to get to means it receives just a tiny fraction of the visitors at the larger Taman Negara National Park.
- There is no phone signal in the park.

With nearly 900 square kilometres of wilderness, Endau Rompin is paradise for nature lovers, with hiking, swimming, boating and opportunities for wildlife observation.

Hard-core hikers could spend a week going deep into the jungle, but most arrive on two or three-night packages. This is sufficient to trek to waterfalls and spend time with the Orang Asli community.

The area around the Visitors Centre at Kampung Peta can be explored independently and has a garden of tropical plants and a suspension bridge.

Going further into the jungle requires a guide. Not only will they help you navigate the overgrown paths, for multi-day camping trips they help carry the supplies and do the cooking. The park guides are Orang Asli who live in Kampung Peta and rates start from 50 ringgit per day.

This is an important source of income for the village and allows them to use their expert knowledge of the jungle where they've lived for generations. On long treks, they'll show you which water sources are safe to drink and which jungle plants are edible. They'll also take you to swimming lagoons and waterfalls. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Simple fare.*



# Georgetown



Georgetown has many a nook and cranny and dotted through the city are beautiful mansions, some old and broken, others transformed into bars and chic cafes where live bands play late into the night. The more you explore, the more you'll find in this fascinating amalgam of East and West.

# Georgetown



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Declared by UNESCO 'a living world heritage city' in June 2008, Georgetown is a meld of historic 19th century buildings and contemporary Malaysia.
- Visiting the sights in Georgetown is best done on foot but tread carefully: pavements are uneven and drains are either open or covered over in the most rickety fashion.
- Georgetown has plenty of accommodation. Backpackers should try Muntri House, flashpackers will like Noordin Mews and for lovers, look no further than 23 Love Lane.
- Look out for Georgetown's street art – it's a highlight for many.

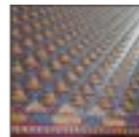
Penang's Georgetown is crammed full of traditional 19th-century Chinese shophouses, spectacular temple architecture and an extraordinarily large number of beautiful clan houses.

As well as its renowned architecture and myriad restaurants, one of the town's biggest draws is the chance to wander its atmospheric backstreets and experience snapshots of daily life as it has existed for generations: an incense maker sitting in front of his 200-year-old shophouse, moulding traditional joss sticks from a paste of sandalwood; a group of retirees sitting around a mah jong table in the cool shade of the front verandah, known as a 'five-foot way'; glimpses through open doorways of beaten-up sofas juxtaposed with gilded screens and antique furniture; the strains of traditional Chinese music coming out of an archaic cassette player; motorbikes and clothes left out to dry; the clutter of daily life is here for all to observe.

Part of the charm of Georgetown is that for the most part it isn't glossy. The pavements are cracked, the walls uneven and blemished and the louvred windows are weathered. And the best bonus? The exceptionally delicious food. [Read more on Travefish.org.](#)



*Gaining kilos at a Georgetown cooking school.*



# Kuala Terengganu



We liked Kuala Terengganu as a pleasant place to just hang out. A few days spent on Pulau Duyong watching the river slide by from one of the cheap shacks at Awi's Yellow House then another day or so eating your way around town with a little light sightseeing (don't overdo it) worked for us.

# Kuala Terengganu



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- At its heart Kuala Terengganu remains a small and decidedly conservative Malaysian town.
- Uber basic Awi's Yellow House will not appeal to everyone, but we loved it. Most backpackers go for Ping's Anchorage in town, Citi Point Hotel is a reasonable midrange option and Hotel Seri Malaysia is a reliable fancier choice.
- The seafood, especially in Chinatown, is excellent. This is also where you'll most easily find beer. Most of KT is dry.
- Don't miss the National Museum and be sure to leave yourself enough time to enjoy it.

While most view Kuala Terengganu as a transport hub as they make their way up or down the Malaysian coast (or use it as a base before heading to some of the nearby islands), the town is certainly worth an overnight or two should you have the time.

Jalan Cina -- KT's Chinatown -- is the most interesting area for a first-time visitor. As with Penang and Phuket, there are plenty of traditional shophouse buildings, some of which have been lovingly restored, and there's also a few excellent eateries along the way. Keep an eye out for the alley with murals dedicated to the sad collapse in turtle numbers.

Another worthwhile point is the National Museum -- it is very inconveniently located, but worth the effort to reach. Also down in this direction you'll find the Crystal Mosque and the Islamic Civilisation Park. Neither of these are really worth going to Malaysia alone to see, but if you're in the area, the Crystal Mosque in particular is quite attractive.

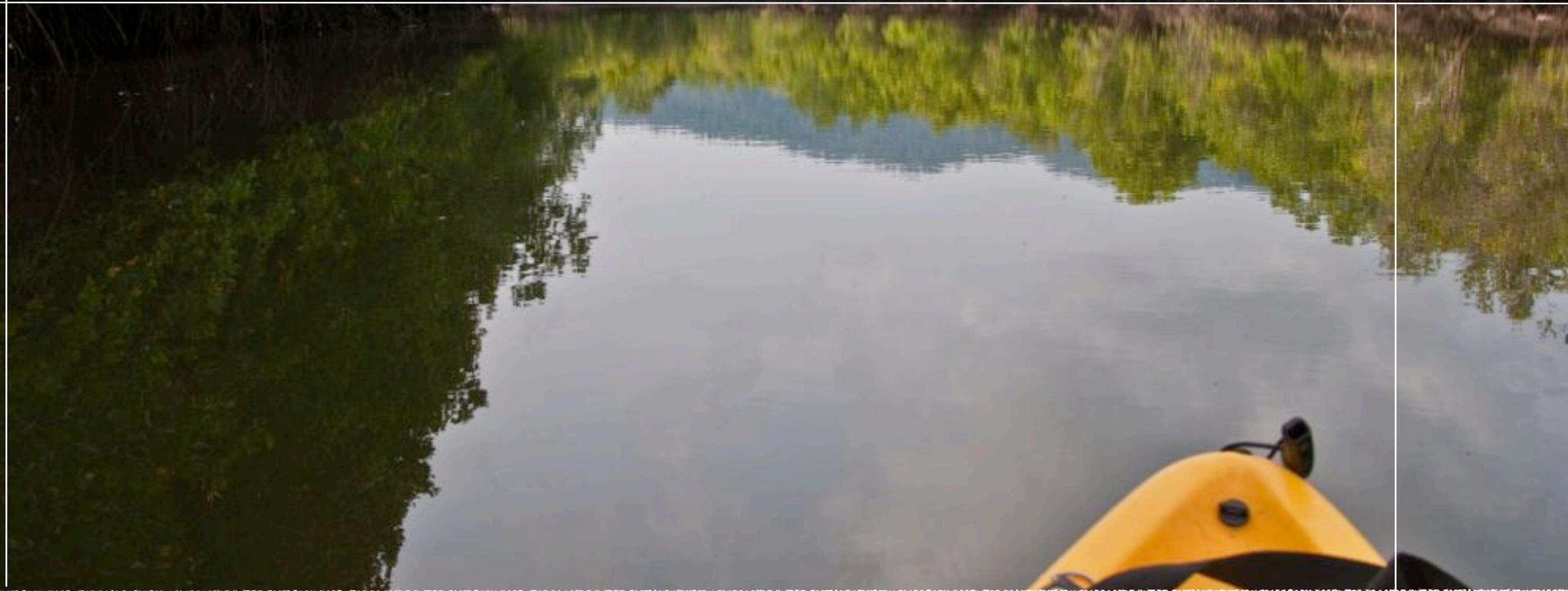
If you're looking for a truly rustic traveller crash pad, do check out Awi's Yellow House. There are very few old-style places like this still in business these days. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Kuala Terengganu's waterfront promenade.*



# Langkawi



The Malaysian island of Langkawi is a jungle-clad getaway at the very bottom of the Andaman Sea on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Nearly the size of Singapore, Langkawi is surrounded by beautiful beaches and towering limestone karsts.

# Langkawi



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Langkawi's airport offers quick connections to Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Regular ferries run from the mainland and there is also a direct ferry service to Penang.
- Langkawi is a duty-free island.
- While there are plenty of beaches, backpackers are drawn to Pantai Tengah, flashpackers to Pantai Cenang and the higher-end gravitate to either Pantai Datai or Tanjung Rhu.
- There are plenty of ATMs on the island and internet access is commonplace.
- Don't miss the cable car – it will take your breath away.

While Langkawi has a reputation as a resort island, this isn't really all that warranted. While it does have big hotels, plenty of budget and midrange options mean your stay needn't be all that expensive.

The island's rugged northern section is home to jungled peaks and beautiful mangroves, along with a host of lesser-known beaches. For the more adventurous willing to use their own transport, the island's network of smooth, sealed roads offers ideal scope for exploring.

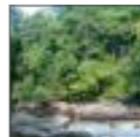
While the beach areas have developed in ways targeted towards travellers, the interior of Langkawi remains more traditional, both in lifestyle and outlook.

Courtesy of its international airport, the island attracts a diverse crowd of Western, Asian and Middle Eastern tourists. This has translated into a wealth of eating options across many different cuisines.

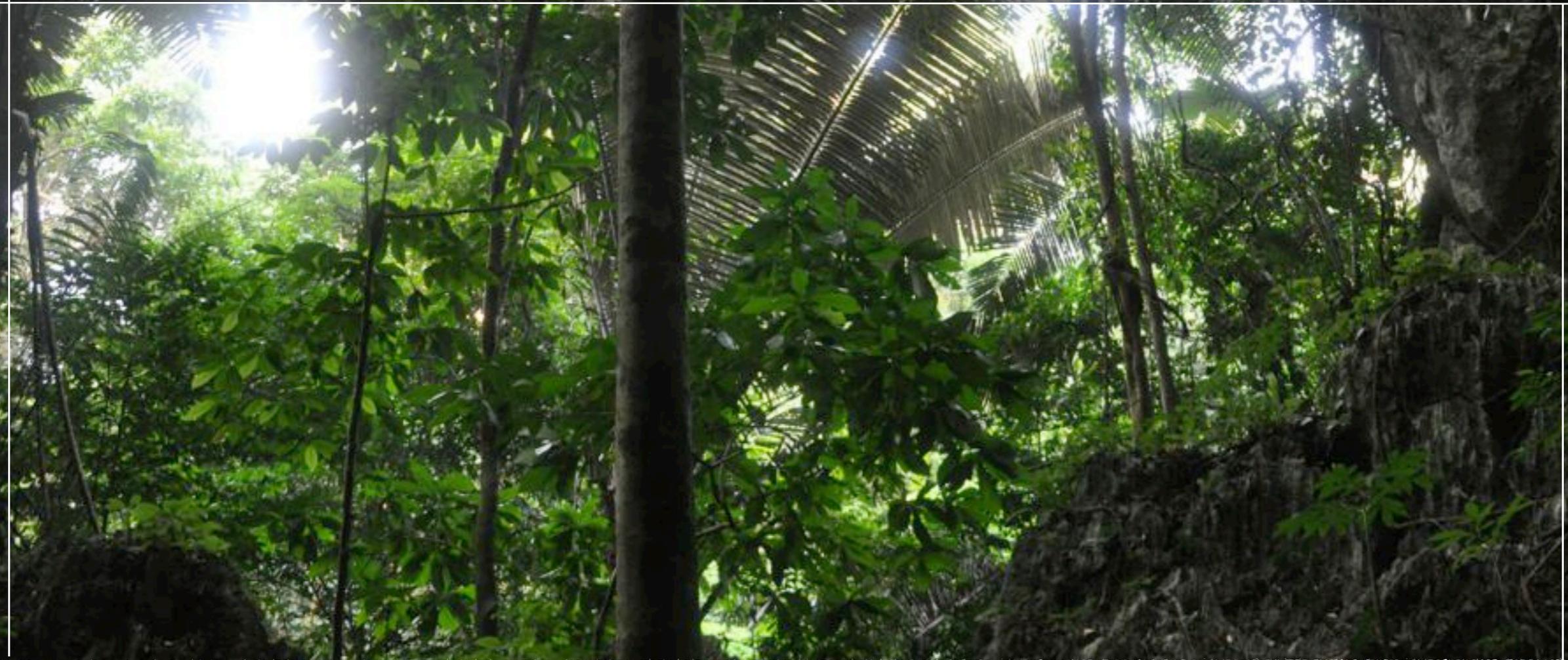
Combine this with the island's duty-free status, meaning it is one of the more affordable places in Malaysia to enjoy a cool alcoholic drink by the beach, and you've got a bit of a winning combination. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Langkawi's impressive cable car.*



# Taman Negara



The superlatives come easy when it comes to Taman Negara National Park. The old-growth forest, mostly untouched by humans, is believed to be more than 130 million years old -- making it the oldest primary forest in the world.

# Taman Negara National Park

## LOGISTICS

- While Taman Negara spreads over more than 4,000 square kilometres and the three provinces of Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu, just about everyone visits it from the riverside hamlet of Kuala Tahan.
- Budget travellers will be at home at Rippi Hostel, while spending a little more goes a long way at Tahan Guest House. Mutiare Taman Negara Resort is quite flash and the only place to stay within the park (aside from camping).
- If coming from Kuala Lumpur, catching the bus is a lot faster and far more convenient than the train. If coming from Kota Bharu, take the train.

It is possible to spend more than a week hiking through Taman Negara totally incommunicado, but most first-time visitors will spend one, two or three days in the park.

Organised one- or two-night treks can be arranged, generally involving a boat trip to the starting point. The longer the trek, the greater the expense, but not always the greater the experience.

Simple activities within the park that do not require a guide include the Canopy Walkway, where you can walk through the high forest canopy on suspended rope bridges, and Bukit Teresik, a double viewpoint. Trips that require a guide include the night jungle walk, fishing trip, river rafting and a visit to the Orang Asli village along the river.

While longer treks can stretch to as much as nine days -- to summit Gunung Tahan, the tallest peak in peninsular Malaysia -- in practice most opt for a two-day or three-day trek starting from Kuala Keniam a couple of hours upriver of Kuala Tahan. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Morning mist as we cruise up the river.*

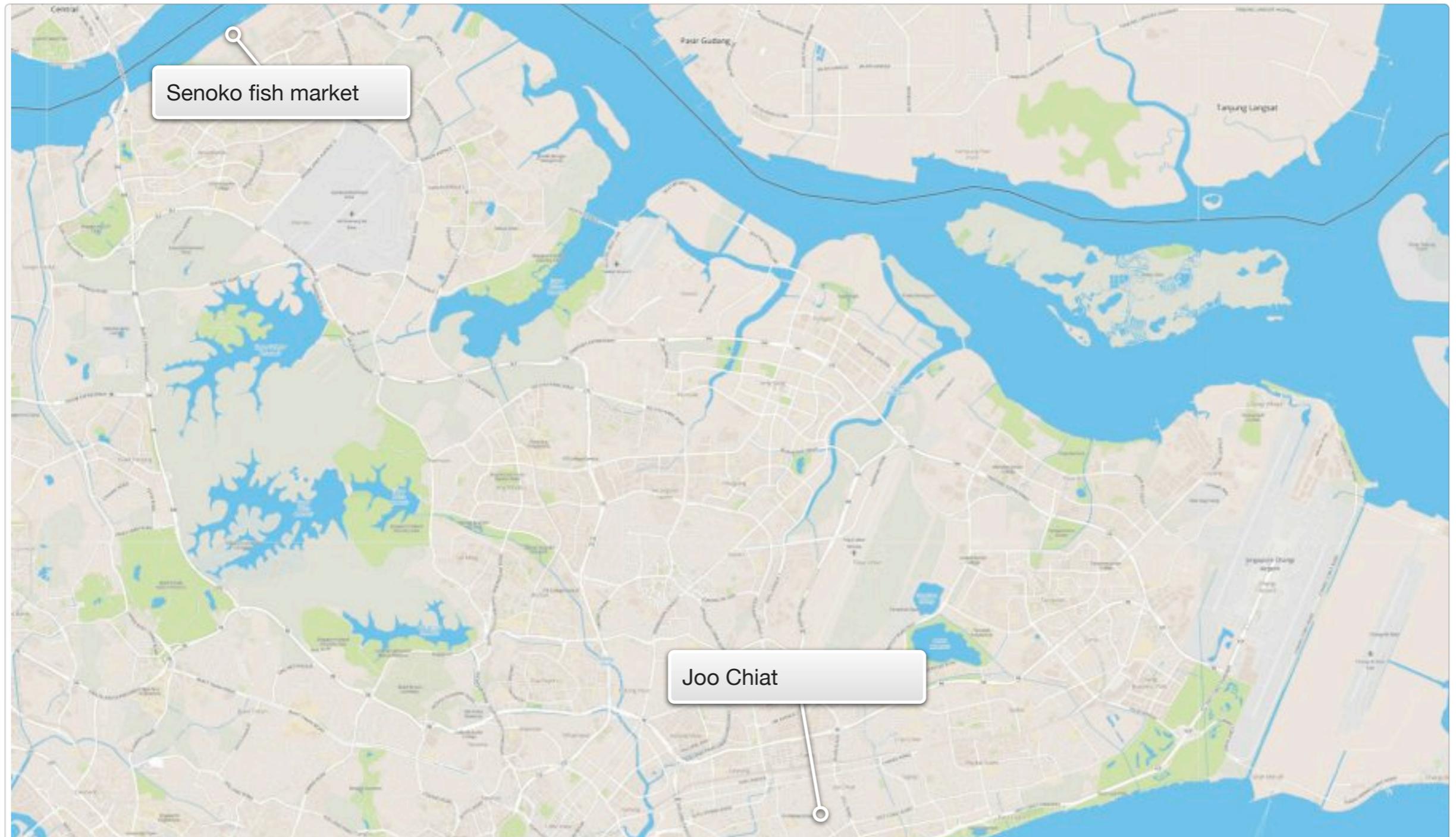


# Singapore

A photograph showing a large, green grassy field in the foreground. In the middle ground, two children are running away from the camera towards the right. The child in front is wearing a purple shirt and dark pants, and the child behind is wearing a blue shirt and dark shorts. In the background, a city skyline is visible, featuring several tall buildings and a prominent, curved, metallic structure that resembles the Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay. The sky is overcast and grey.

Off Orchard Road beautiful shopfronts jostle with the gleaming towers, malls and hi-tech that Singapore is better known for, revealing a destination that really is worth an extra day or so.

# Singapore



A collage of images showing bowls of red chili sauce and fresh green avocados. The top half features several purple bowls filled with a vibrant red chili sauce, topped with finely chopped red and yellow chili peppers. The bottom half shows a metal tray containing several whole, bright green avocados. The background is a warm, yellowish light, suggesting an indoor setting.

# Eating Joo Chiat

To get behind the gleaming facade of Singapore, take a Betel Box food walking tour of the Joo Chiat area. Your tummy will be stuffed with delicious local cuisine and your brain will be filled with knowledge of local Singaporean culture.

# Joo Chiat food tour



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- The Joo Chiat area in Singapore's east was once a coconut plantation owned by one Mr Chew Joo Chiat, also known as "The King of Katong". In the early 1900s the government built Joo Chiat Road through his plantation and he sold plots of land where people built the beautiful shophouses you see today.
- Joo Chiat boasts plenty of restaurants and kopi tiams famed throughout Singapore; there's a strong Peranakan heritage visible in the area.
- You don't have to stay at Betel Box to do any of the excellent tours on offer, but though the hostel doesn't have the polish of a competitive Singapore scene, we love the friendly staff and relaxed vibe here.

For a tour of a lesser-known side of Singapore run by a genuinely passionate and knowledgeable guide, you can't beat a food and culture tour with Betel Box Hostel owner Tony Tan. Tony has been running the tours for years and we are amazed at how he sustains his enthusiasm for everything Singaporean.

Our tour kicked off with a visit to Housing Development Board flats for an unusual sunset view, then we explored the streets of Joo Chiat, with stops to check out fruit, a bak chang joint and various restaurants for takeout -- all with a running, informative commentary -- before setting up camp at Chilli Padi Nonya to eat our delicious foraged meal, plus dishes from their kitchen as well.

Just when we wanted to tumble into bed to coma off our meals, Tony dragged us off into the night for stops at a supermarket and another HDB for some midnight chatting and explanations of Singaporean life -- money, sex, drugs and rock 'n roll all featured.

The price tag of S\$80 may seem steep, but it's money very well spent. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Moonrise over Batam in the distance.*



# Senoko fish market



Seafood aficionados love Singapore for its barbecue stingray, black pepper crab and cereal prawns — the seafood on the island is as fresh as you can get. But where does your seafood go between the sea and your table? Enter Singapore's fish markets.

# Senoko fish market

## LOGISTICS

- Senoko fish market is open Tuesday to Sunday from 02:00 till 06:00 – this is why Singaporeans often avoid eating seafood on Monday.
- More than 200 tonnes of fresh fish changes hands here each day. About half the produce is locally caught; the rest is imported.
- Get here by cab – it'll take about 30 minutes from the Orchard Road area.
- Bring some identification such as a passport to get in past the security post; you'll need to leave this in exchange for a pass.

While the rest of Singapore is asleep, the fast-paced action at Senoko fish market makes for a night's fun. Leave your leather sandals and sneakers in the hostel, and get those flip-flops out as this is an Asian wet market at its best. Fishy-smelling water sloshes around your feet, while half-dressed fish merchants tramp around in galoshes, stack baskets of squid and anchovies and weigh shrimp with traditional scales.

Restaurant owners eschew sleep to get the freshest produce they can from markets like this. Sometimes, when there's a prized catch, fishermen call these owners to come examine their goods and buy them after bargaining. Besides fish you'll see sea cucumbers, sharks, squids, shrimp and more, depending on the haul that the currents of the Straits of Malacca and South China Sea sweep to Singapore shores.

Tired of getting in the way of frenzied fish merchants and their trolleys? There's a canteen where you can grab a bite and a hot cup of coffee. And when you devour your barbecue squid the next evening in the cool comfort of the East Coast breeze, just think of the long journey it took to land on your table. Long after you're done and back in bed, the Senoko market will continue to hum. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*No doubt tastier than they look.*

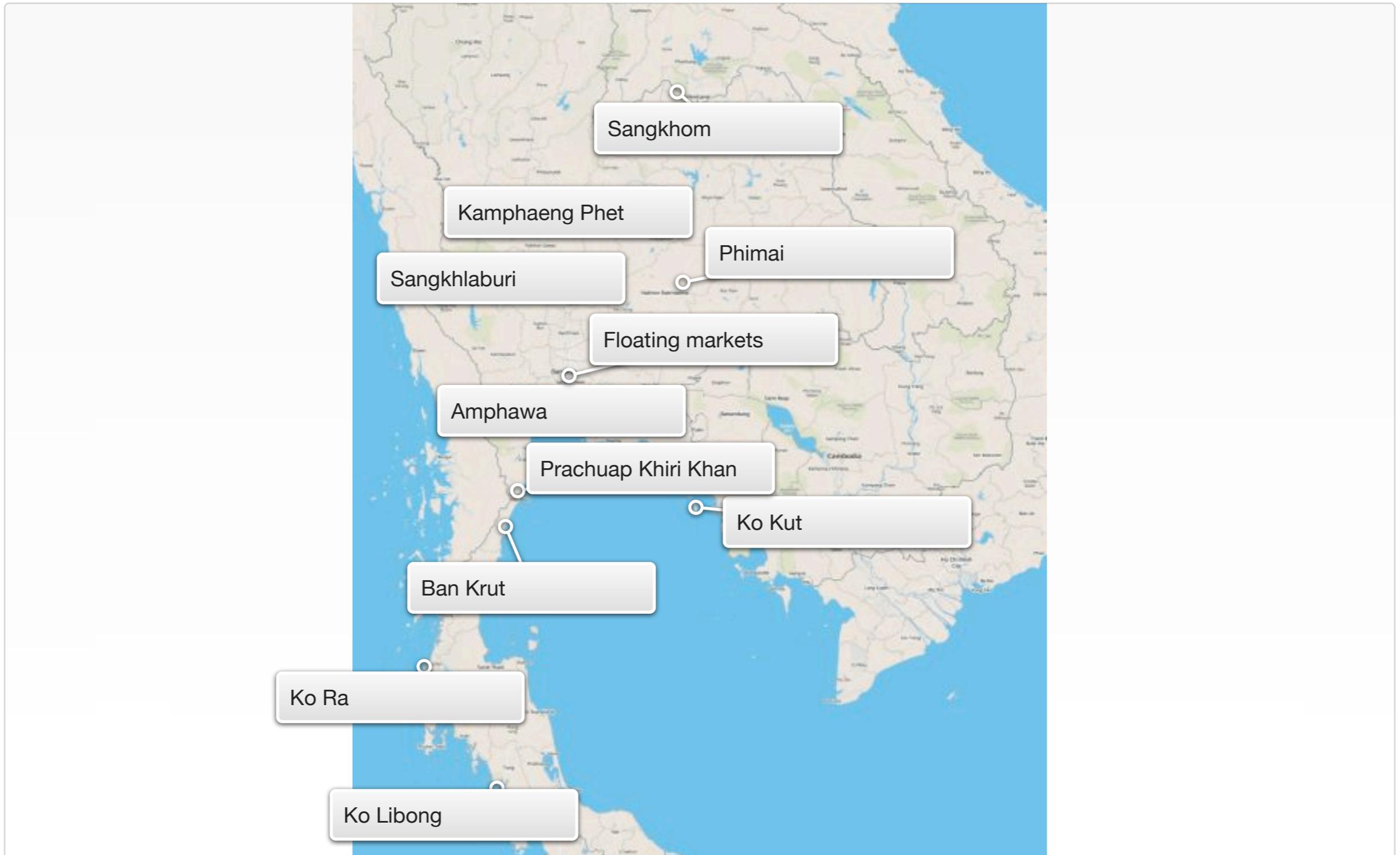


# Thailand



With the most heavily trodden tourist trail in Southeast Asia, you'd think it would be difficult to find quality off the beaten track destinations. Nothing could be further from the truth.

# Thailand



# Amphawa



At first light, monks row through the canal on alms round past kids out for a day of fishing. Grandmothers crack eggs in the open-air kitchens of their old teak wood homes, and farmers head off to market in rowboats that brim with pomelo, lychee and banana. This is Thailand's Amphawa.

# Amphawa



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Amphawa is set beside the Mae Khlong river and clustered around Amphawa canal in Samut Songkhram province, some 75 kilometres southwest of Bangkok.
- The town received an award from UNESCO in 2008 for its efforts to conserve its centuries-old teak wood homes and temples that line the canal.
- The easiest way to get to Amphawa is by minibus from Bangkok's Victory Monument.
- Backpackers may like Baan Song Thai Basee Homestay while canalside ChababaanCham Resort is both stylish and romantic.

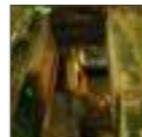
While most come for the floating market, Amphawa is worth a stay. Unlike other floating markets that finish up by late morning, Amphawa's is an all-day affair, where hundreds of vendors sell prepared foods and artsy souvenirs, some on the footpaths beside the canal and others on anchored boats within the canal itself.

The majority of foreign tourists hit the market on a daytrip from Bangkok, usually on a guided tour, but Amphawa is not difficult to visit independently, and several homestays and small resorts make an overnight stay worthwhile. A mid-week visit is a good idea if you're seeking some downtime, especially considering room rates are often cut in half outside of the weekends. Be warned that most market vendors close up during the week, but some great food can still be found.

Boats and fishing are a way of life throughout Samut Songkhram province, and no visit to Amphawa would be complete without a taste of the area's bountiful seafood. A number of other markets and sights in the outlying area are also worth a visit, most of which can be reached by hiring a boat for a full or half-day of exploring the Mae Khlong river and its tributaries. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*A morning stroll.*



# Ban Krut



One bay north of Bang Saphan and around 70 kilometres south of Prachuap Khiri Khan sits Ban Krut, a cute little Thai town with a pretty and very low-key sweeping stretch of sand lined by a mix of coconut palms and casuarina trees. Think of it as Cha-am without any of the annoying stuff!

# Ban Krut



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Backpackers should head straight to Siripong Guesthouse, flashpackers to Ban Krut Resort and more midrange travellers will be well served at Baan Grood Arcadia Resort.
- Ban Krut is on the main north-south train line, so it's easy to get here from Bangkok – or anywhere else on the railway for that matter.
- ATMs and internet are readily available both by the beach and near the train station.
- Good motorbikes can be hired at Siripong Guesthouse for 200 baht per day.

Why stop in Ban Krut? Well, to be honest, aside from some serious tan-work, there's not much to do here other than swim and eat, but that's not to say it isn't worth a visit -- you're on holiday right?

There is a cave temple you can visit by motorbike and the hilltop temple offers great views to the south, though you'll need to wander a bit to get a view to the north.

If nothing else, if you're staying in the Bang Saphan Yai area anyway, consider it as a potential daytrip destination, though we'd be inclined to stay in Ban Krut and visit Bang Saphan on a daytrip, but whatever works for you.

Things get a bit livelier (by Ban Krut standards) as you near the Big Buddha towards the northern end of the beach where some good, cheap seafood restaurants are by the beach -- nothing says holiday more than eating shrimp with your fingers, feet in the sand. Some stalls even have English menus -- how's that for flash?

Another advantage of Ban Krut is that it's very convenient to the main north-south train line, so it's an easy escape from Bangkok. [Read more on Travefish.org.](#)



*Rather nice.*



# Floating markets



Stumpy bananas, rose apples, coconuts and spices sit piled on thin wooden sampans rowed by farmers in bamboo hats. Old teak wood houses seem to bend over the calm water of countryside canals. Perhaps nothing in Thailand captivates travellers' imaginations more than a floating market.

# Bangkok's floating markets

## LOGISTICS

- Thaling Chan is the most convenient floating market to reach.
- Locals meet and share food on weekends at Khlong Lat Mayom.
- Kwan Riam doesn't hide the fact that it's a modern floating market.
- Bang Nam Phueng is a focal point in the lives of villagers from Phra Phradaeng.
- Don Wai has one of the most incredible spreads of food in Thailand.
- Khlong Suan is great for unforgettable food and an old school ambiance.
- Be sure to leave room for the luscious yellow mangoes at Bang Khla.

Thailand's floating markets make for fun diversions -- there are plenty to choose from that are one to two hours' drive from Bangkok. Pick one to visit and you'll likely discover a new destination with great food to match.

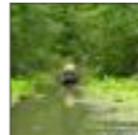
Floating markets are relics of a long-past era when, as the sun rose on the days of full and new moons, farmers would haul their goods by boat to trade with other farmers and merchants from the cities. The floating market was a natural extension of an agricultural lifestyle centred around the waterways.

When roads and tires took the place of rivers and oars, floating markets nearly died out. They've seen a resurgence over the past couple of decades, and especially in the last five years, though they typically function today as tourist attractions and community meeting places rather than vital aspects of local farming economies.

Some markets are not quite "floating" but to be fair, the Thai term talaat nam translates as "water market". Some don't even have vendors on boats, but all are centred around a river or canal, and it's possible to arrange a boat trip at any of them. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*If it swims, they have it.*



# Kamphaeng Phet



Nestled along a wide stretch of the Ping river, near where the plains meet the Tanon Thong Chai mountains, Kamphaeng Phet is home to 30,000 relaxed people and an underrated historical park. While few travellers squeeze the area into their itineraries, it rightly rewards those who do.

# Kamphaeng Phet



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Kamphaeng Phet means "diamond wall" in Thai.
- Kamphaeng Phet is not on the train line but can be reached by bus from Bangkok, Chiang Mai and other regional centres.
- Three J Guesthouse is hands-down the best place to stay. Those looking for more creature comforts should try Navarat Heritage Hotel or the Scenic Riverside Resort.
- Many visit as a day trip from Sukhothai, and while a half-day to a day is enough to experience the historical park and related museums, we recommend staying for an overnight or two.

As a western fortress of Sukhothai from the 13th to 15th centuries, and later a key defensive outpost of the Ayutthaya kingdom, Kamphaeng Phet lived up to its name -- at least for a while -- and its original earthen and brickwork walls continue to stand as testaments to its mediaeval military might.

Between battles, the city's ancient residents erected impressive stone temples, monuments and Buddha images that display a distinctive Kamphaeng Phet style. Because the city was important both to the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya kingdoms, artistic elements of both can be seen here.

Along with the ruins at Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai, Kamphaeng Phet Historical Park was declared part of the World Heritage-listed Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns in 1991. Unlike Sukhothai, Kamphaeng Phet offers a chance to explore the ruins with hardly anyone else around.

If you settle in to what's arguably Thailand's friendliest guesthouse -- Three J -- don't be surprised if you end up hanging around for longer than planned. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Waterfall in Khlong Lan National Park.*



# Ko Kut



We're going to go out on a limb and declare Ko Kut to be the most beautiful island we've seen in Thailand over two decades of travel to the kingdom. There. We said it. It really is just drop dead gorgeous. And we strongly recommend you add it to your next Thailand itinerary.

# Ko Kut



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Ko Kut is also commonly spelt Ko Kood or Ko Kud.
- The island is reached by a ferry from the pier at Laem Sok which is about 30 kilometres from Trat. Trat has bus and flight connections to Bangkok.
- There are more than a dozen public beaches, each with their own character and vibe.
- Prices are somewhat higher than what you may be accustomed to on other Thai islands. Many travellers visit on a package, though this is not necessary.
- Off the beach there are at least three waterfalls worth visiting. Much of the island's interior remains jungle.

Set to the south of better known Ko Chang, Ko Kut is a mountainous island whose interior remains largely jungle covered and whose western and southern coasts are dotted with glorious white-sand beaches. The waters surrounding the island are crystal clear and some beaches have an other-worldly Maldivian appearance. It's beautiful.

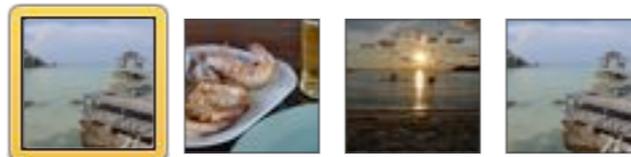
Ko Kut has in the past primarily been mostly visited by organised tours, but that has not been the case for a few years now and while some resorts remain totally tour-group focused, others welcome independent travellers with open arms.

Accommodation-wise, budget digs can be found primarily back off Khlong Chao Beach, but this is not a 250 baht beach shack destination. If you want to be on the beach you'll be paying perhaps a little more than you're used to, but we'd say the beaches are worth it. The midrange is a mixed bag of standouts and tour-group spots, while for those accustomed to spending more, there are some special places.

Ko Kut is a seasonal destination and the weather can get pretty horrendous during the monsoon from May through to October, so avoid it then. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Ao Noi. Look at that water!*



# Ko Libong



Ko Libong is not your typical postcard island getaway -- the accommodation is rustic, tourists are outnumbered by locals, and the beaches are not Thailand's best. Even so, it offers a chance to enjoy a laidback nature-jungle experience, and to get a sense of local island village life.

# Ko Libong



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Ko Libong is the largest island in Trang province.
- Ferries leave regularly when full from Ban Haad Yao, a coastal village 30 minutes from Trang.
- Libong Sunset Resort is the most backpacker-focused spot on the island while Libong Beach Resort is the oldest and best equipped.
- Any of the resorts will be happy to arrange a guided canoe trip to have a look-see for dugongs, but as with all wildlife spotting, remember that sightings are not guaranteed.

If you're looking for luxury resorts, spa treatments and staff who speak perfect English, then stop reading now. But if you're tired of the over-development and crowds on places like Ko Phi Phi, and are looking for deserted beaches and thick but accessible jungle, then keep reading.

Ko Libong is home to a thriving Muslim community that earns its livelihood almost exclusively from fishing and rubber tapping. The northern part of the island though is protected as a wildlife preserve, so Libong retains an impressive jungle environment. It is also the best place in Thailand to try and see an endangered dugong in the wild.

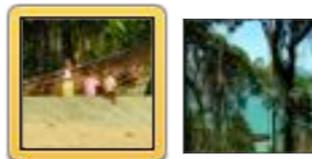
Some picturesque forested cliffs with viewpoints over the ocean are easily accessible by mountain bike, and a kayak ride along the western and northern shores will provide plenty of deserted beaches.

The western beach is an excellent sunset spot, and the coral formations and extreme quiet can combine for an other-worldly feel. If you set out for one of the more isolated beaches, it's nearly guaranteed that your only companions will be the resident hermit crabs -- really!

[Read more on Travefish.org.](#)



*Kids on the beach.*



# Ko Ra



The long, thin and rugged island of Ko Ra is one of Thailand's more remote islands with accommodation, and is a good choice for those seeking an offbeat, eco-minded destination. Most of the island is protected as a wildlife sanctuary, providing a chance to experience a lush, untamed landscape.

# Ko Ra

## LOGISTICS

- You need to organise a boat beforehand (ideally through your accommodation) to take you from Khuraburi to Ko Ra. You can also get a boat from nearby Ko Phra Thong. Khuraburi is roughly halfway between Phuket and Ranong.
- There are no roads and no motorbikes on the island.
- There are no ATMs on the island.
- There is limited internet access.
- Most activity shuts down for the height of the wet season from May to October.
- There are hammocks.

When we last visited, Ko Ra featured only one place to stay, Ko Ra Ecolodge, a true eco-friendly establishment that had its beginnings as a coral reef conservation project in the mid 2000s. We've since been told of a second place that looks great -- Koh Ra Beach Camp.

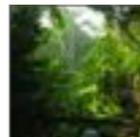
While the Ko Ra experience is most definitely an environmentally conscious one, it's not all about volunteer service. The Eco Lodge offers an array of activities, including jungle treks, kayak trips, snorkelling, bird watching, and visiting Ko Ra's Moken sea nomad village.

While all of these activities involve outward exploration, a popular yoga and meditation retreat with a certified instructor through December to February is offered for those seeking to explore inwardly.

Ko Ra's quiet and peaceful setting indeed make it an ideal place to retreat from the world for a while. The Eco Lodge is situated in the northeast near a small beach that's endowed with surprisingly clean, clear and very swimmable waters given how close it is to the mainland. A couple of larger beaches stretch across parts of the island's west coast and are reachable as part of a popular sunset kayak trip. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Forgot the engine again.*



# Phimai



Some 800 years ago, Phimai was directly connected by a road to Angkor Wat and the centre of the vast and powerful Khmer empire. Also reachable via the Mun River, the outpost was an integral part of the empire, seeing a steady stream of traders and religious travellers passing through its gates.

# Phimai



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Phimai is around 1.5 hours by bus from Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima) in Northeast Thailand. If you are coming from Bangkok you'll most likely need to go via Khorat.
- Boonsiri Guesthouse is our pick of the budget guesthouses in Phimai, but there are a few other places to choose from.
- At Sai Ngam the banyans are surrounded by streams and ponds, and during the rainy season from June to October the area sometimes floods. Should you visit at this time of year, some incredible photos of the trees reflected in the water can be taken, if you don't mind sloshing through ankle deep water to get your shots.

Today, Phimai is not quite so grandiose, but it remains a charming little town nevertheless -- after all, how many Thai towns have an ancient set of ruins sitting in their midst? The main attraction is Prasat Phimai Historical Park, where the fully restored ancient ruins and surrounding gardens are a sea of tranquility in the midst of the sleepy but still vibrant Phimai town.

Though all the key sights may easily be seen in a day, the town's slow pace of life seems to cast a dreamy spell over visitors, so if you've got the time, Phimai is worth a night or two.

Fairly flat, the town is easily travelled on foot but you may prefer to hire a bicycle to ride to outlying destinations like Sai Ngam -- home to Thailand's largest Banyan tree, and the National Museum. During sunset, take a bicycle ride along the vast Mun River, then sample a wealth of scrumptious foods at the night market.

With a handful of inexpensive and comfortable places to stay, budget travellers sometimes find themselves repeating this ritual for a few days. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Relief detail.*



# Prachuap Khiri Khan



A pleasant, friendly city, Prachuap Khiri Khan is at once relaxing and bristling with energy -- full of enterprising ethnic Chinese and other Thais who go about their business without focusing on the tourist industry. It's a bright spot as you head south and worth a visit just to soak up the vibe.

# Prachuap Khiri Khan



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Prachuap Khiri Khan is 93 kilometres south of Hua Hin and 176 kilometres north of Chumphon on Thailand's south coast.
- Maggie's Homestay is the backpacker crashpad of choice while midrange travellers may be tempted by the Prachuap Beach Hotel or Sun Beach Guesthouse.
- Climb Khao Lommuak which towers above the airforce base for spectacular views over Prachuap Khiri Khan and the ocean.
- The seafood here is fabulous – better and more affordable than Hua Hin.

Prachuap Khiri Khan is often sidelined by foreign visitors stopping off in the province's more well known city of Hua Hin further north, or making a beeline for the Gulf islands further south, but if you have the time, it's well worth a couple of nights.

The town has a spectacular appearance, with a long sweeping bay bordered by enormous limestone outcrops to the north and south. There's a municipal beach along this main bay and slightly better beaches within bicycle distance to both the north and south.

In particular, Ao Manao, the sheltered beach set within the Wing 5 air force base to the south, is noteworthy; Ao Noi, about a 45-minute bicycle ride to the north, is less so but still pleasant. In town, the monkey-infested hilltop temple of Chong Khra Chok offers a magnificent view and back at ground level, restaurants serve up excellent locally caught and very affordable seafood.

In some people's minds, this place could well be Thailand's next big thing -- get there while it's still overlooked by most. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Park your boat here.*



# Sangkhlaburi



When travellers dream of Thailand, they may picture jungles, sparkling temples and the exotic charm of rural villages -- Sangkhlaburi is home to all this.

# Sangkhlaburi



## LOGISTICS

- Located 225 kilometres northwest of Kanchanaburi and a mere 24 kilometres from the Burmese border, Sangkhlaburi's seclusion only adds to its mystique.
- Sangkhlaburi is easily reached by bus from Kanchanaburi. There are also through buses from Bangkok that take around 7 hours.
- For a town so isolated, Sangkhlaburi has an outstanding range of accommodation.
- When the town's signature wooden footbridge collapsed in 2013, residents of every ethnicity joined forces to piece together an awe-inspiring floating bamboo bridge in an incredibly short amount of time.

Sangkhlaburi is set towards the end of one of Thailand's most spectacular roads, nestled on the low hills edging Vajiralongkorn Lake. Sheltered to the north and east by higher forest-covered limestone ranges, the lake is a reservoir that was created when a dam was built, submerging most of the original Sangkhlaburi village back in 1982.

Unless you put on scuba gear, all that can be seen of the old village today is the top of a temple wiharn and the temple tower nearby. A boat trip on the lake is a must while in Sangkhlaburi -- sunrise over the misty, mirror-like water is magical.

While Sangkhlaburi was traditionally a Karen town, a recent influx of Thais, along with numerous Mon and Burmese settlers fleeing problems in Burma, have created a culturally diverse atmosphere. Residents live in hill stations, floating rafhouses and stilted bamboo houses where children frolic with clucking chickens.

The outlying area is among the most picturesque in all of Thailand. Tiny Karen and Mon villages, caves, waterfalls, the vast Thung Yai Naresuan wildlife reserve and Khao Laem National Park ensure that there's an adventure to suit all tastes. [Read more on Travelfish.org](#)



*Gorgeous light over the lake.*



# Sangkhom



Nestled along a scenic stretch of the Mekong River in western Nong Khai province, the tiny village of Sangkhom is one of those little-known, remote places that turns out to be a highlight for those willing to sidestep the well-trodden track. In other words, we love Sangkhom!

# Sangkhom



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Sangkhom sits 80 km west of Nong Khai and just 25 km east of the border with Loei province.
- The quaint little town is nothing more than a single road – Route 211. Along the main drag you'll find a couple of convenience stores, a few ATMs and a small hospital.
- You won't find a McDonalds in Sangkhom, but the charming restaurant at Buoy Guesthouse does a good mix of home-cooked Thai-Isaan fare and basic breakfasts.

If you're embarking on a Mekong motorbiking adventure, this is an ideal place to take a breather -- be it for an hour or a week. One of our favourite places to stay in Thailand, Buoy Guesthouse, is another good reason to stick around for a while.

The town itself is an ideal place to enjoy fresh-caught Mekong fish and Mekong whiskey at a restaurant terrace perched over the Mekong River. While most who make it here end up spending hours lounging riverside, the surrounding area boasts a handful of worthwhile attractions that are often devoid of visitors on weekdays.

A short ride in either direction takes you past idyllic scenes of straw-hatted locals tending riverside fields of tobacco and papaya. Waterfalls, caves and forest temples dot the lush hills that extend for many miles to the south and west.

The rather bizarre Phu Pra Baht Historical Park, located in a remote corner of northern Udon Thani province, can be visited as a day trip from Sangkhom.



*A hammock with your name on it.*

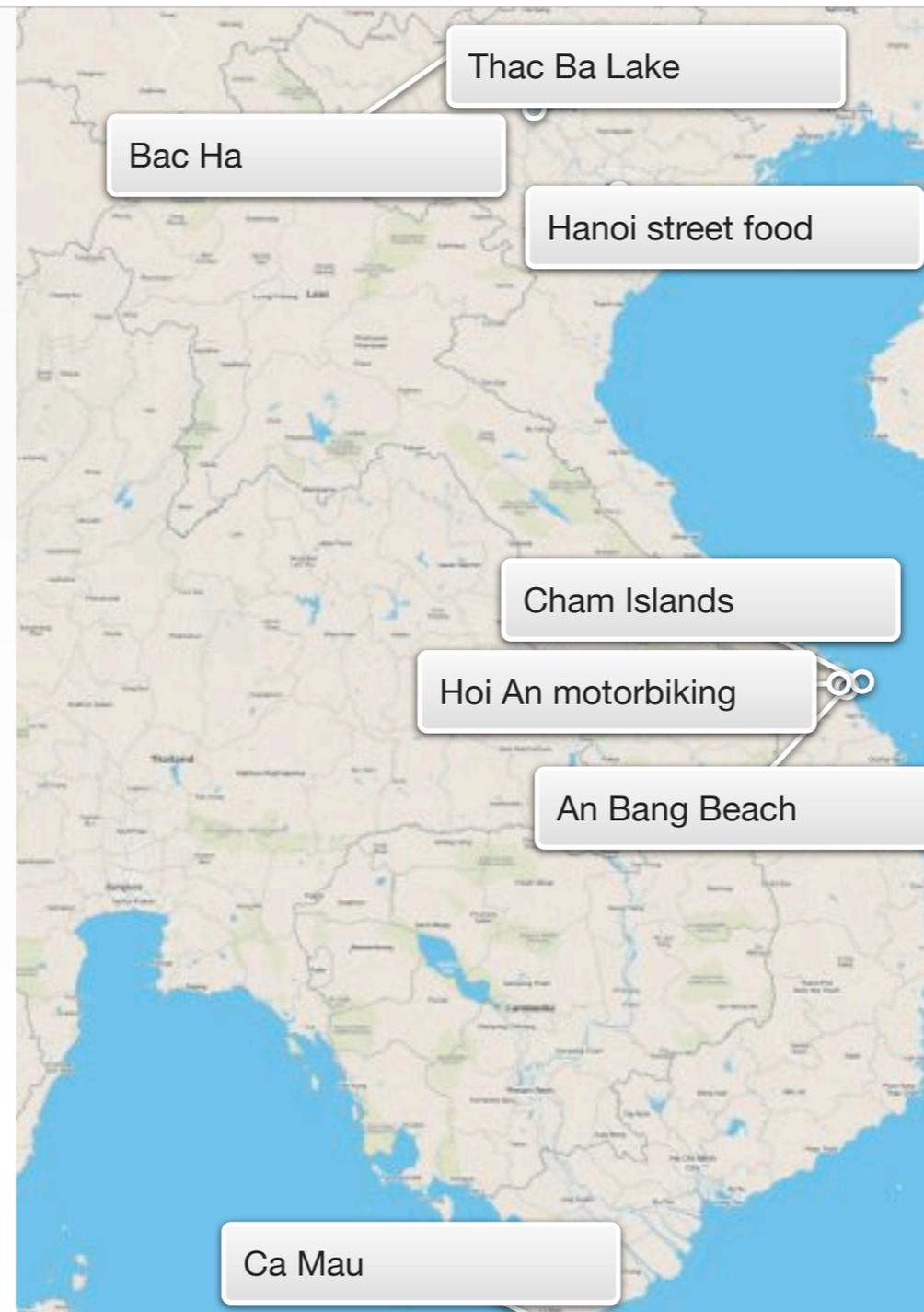


# Vietnam



Many first time visitors to Vietnam opt for a fairly traditional run between Saigon in the south and Hanoi in the north. There are however, plenty of rewarding side trips you can do off this route.

# Vietnam



# An Bang Beach



Think casuarina-lined white sand, just the right balance of great restaurants and bars, green lawns, island views and year-round swimming in the tropical East Sea and you've got An Bang Beach in Hoi An.

# An Bang Beach



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- An Bang beach is just four kilometres from UNESCO-listed Hoi An.
- An Bang's dry season falls between March and September, offering the best beach weather with temperatures soaring beyond 30 degrees Celsius.
- In wet season you can see up to six foot (mushy) surf. Surfboards can be hired.
- You can rent a basic but well positioned two-bedroom property from \$450 for a month by An Bang.
- Midrange travellers may like the luxurious Temple Beach House, while flashpackers should head to An Bang Seaside Village.

Just four kilometres from the UNESCO-listed town of Hoi An and 30 kilometres from the international airport in Da Nang, An Bang Beach isn't going to stay secret forever, but while it still – relatively – is, it's one of the most perfect places to kick off your flipflops and don your sarong.

An Bang is one of the few remaining stretches of beach mostly unspoilt by development, offering clean blue sea, castaway restaurants and bohemian beach bars.

It flaunts not only the most fabulous island and mountain views that you don't even need to climb off your lounge to enjoy, but also some of the best seafood in Hoi An.

This little slice of paradise is finally giving the more well known Cua Dai Beach a run for its money and what's so great is that it's popular all year round with both locals and tourists alike.

They even have a locally funded life saving club – the An Bang Surf Rescue Team patrol the waters in coracle boats and the beach from a towering bamboo platform in the more popular summer months. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Local beach, local boat.*



# Bac Ha



It's something of a shame that few tourists venture beyond Sapa, because to the east lies the other half of the province, where the ground soars upwards again to the peaks of the Chay River massif. There you'll find Bac Ha, an ideal location for off-the-beaten-track treks to colourful weekly markets.

# Bac Ha

## LOGISTICS

- Regular morning buses ply the two-hour trip from the provincial capital of Lao Cai to Bac Ha. Lao Cai has a rail connection to Hanoi and minivans to Sapa.
- Bac Ha is at an altitude of around 700 metres, so bring a warm top for the chilly mornings and evenings.
- Internet access is possible in Bac Ha but there are no ATMs so bring enough cash with you.
- The Ngan Nga Hotel is the best deal in town, while if you are looking for an out-of-village homestay experience, consider Highlands Homestay.

Bac Ha is a 'little Sapa' and while it's less developed for tourism, it's an ideal hub from where to visit the Can Cau and Bac Ha markets. There you'll witness scenes that have been going on for generations, where cattle, horses, goats and dogs are bought and sold, as well as many traditional goods like saddles, elaborate textiles and handbags.

You'll also be able to see other trinkets made by the local tribespeople, the Flower Hmong. Their intricately woven daily costume is one of the main drawing points in itself. This is an incredibly beautiful part of Vietnam.

Don't expect any pizzas or breathtaking mountain views. Bac Ha is still, first and foremost, a local market town, and the tourist industry is only being added on, wherever it fits in. This is of course part of the attraction – although expect to be approached by H'mong hawkers.

Markets aside, there are some less-travelled trekking and homestay trips available in the area, with visits to a variety of ethnic villages, particularly the Flower H'mong. About half the tribes in the area are H'mong, with the rest being Tay, Dzao, Tu Zi, Nung, Phula, La Chi and Lo Lo, among others. [Read more on Travelfish.org](https://www.travelfish.org).



*Have a rest and practise your instrument.*



# Ca Mau



Ca Mau has to be one of the least visited provinces of Vietnam -- it is certainly one of the most isolated, clawing down into the waters of the Gulf of Thailand. Here you'll find the U-Minh Forest, one of the largest mangrove forests in the world.

# Ca Mau



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Despite its isolated location, Ca Mau has bus connections to most Mekong Delta provincial capitals and Saigon. It also has a domestic airport.
- While there are plenty of hotels in Ca Mau, many don't accept foreigners. The Song Ngoc Hotel should be sufficient for most.
- U-Minh forest is roughly halfway between Ca Mau and Rach Gia. If you don't have your own transport, you'll need to hire a motorbike or car in Ca Mau.
- To reach Dat Mui you can get a speedboat via Nam Can to there from where you then need to get a xe om to Vietnam's southernmost point.

Very few travellers visit Vietnam's southernmost province, Ca Mau, which encompasses the entire southern tip of the Mekong Delta including the country's southern apex, Cape Ca Mau (Dat Mui). Riddled with canals and rivers, the province is a boat traveller's dream and is home to the spectacular U-Minh wetlands reserve.

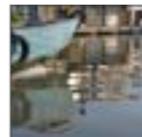
The provincial capital is a typical large Delta city, but there is plenty of boat traffic through its midst. Get up early for some good photos under that glorious morning light and don't forget to explore the market.

With an equally early start you can get a "speedboat" from the boat pier in Ca Mau all the way south to Dat Mui (via Nam Can). Once there you get a xe om to the country's southernmost point. It's attractive in an end of the world kind of way, but the real highlight is the river scenery there and back. Note that the trip is long and quite uncomfortable.

The wetlands at U-Minh, midway between Ca Mau and Rach Gia, are far more impressive and if you visit we highly recommend doing a boat trip to the viewpoints and to visit the bats. Expect to see plenty of birdlife.



*In the heart of U-Minh.*



# Cham Islands



The Cham Islands aren't just about diving. The lure of some of the most unspoilt islands in Vietnam and the chance to camp out under the stars on an incredible stretch of beach has made the islands the perfect escape between tailor fittings.

# Cham Islands

## LOGISTICS

- The Cham Islands are located a 20 kilometre boat ride from Cua Dai harbour by Hoi An.
- From June to August the coral reef surrounding the islands become a micro-diver's paradise, with 20-plus metre visibility making it a great option for snorkelling too.
- There are several very basic guesthouses on the island, with the best by far being the relatively new Cham Island Guest House. Homestay Bai Huong is another good option. There is no electricity anywhere on the island from 22:00 till 06:00.

You don't have to look hard to find a rainbow of tropical sea-life lurking among the hard and soft corals off the Cham Islands, with lion, angel, scorpion and parrot fish, anemones, sea cucumbers, Christmas trees and moray eels.

Although it would be very easy to spend your whole day alternating between sea and sand on one of the island's eight secluded bays, indulging in the occasional fresh seafood snack in between, Hon Lao Island has much more to offer.

Explore the two main villages, Tan Hiep and Bay Huong, plus dozens of pagodas and shrines and a jungle-clad interior with its highest peak 450 metres above sea level.

A favourite accommodation option is camping on the beach. This you must arrange in advance as the army very much frowns upon people pitching tents without permission.

Both dive centres will set you up with tents, a beach bonfire and a seafood dinner; the South China Sea throws in a spectacular phosphorescent show even more sparkly than the unpolluted night sky. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Plenty of beach to go around.*



A collage of fresh produce including ginger, onions, red chilies, green limes, and passion fruits. The text "Hanoi street food" is overlaid on the top left.

# Hanoi street food

After four tours, approximately 13 kilometres of walking, three portions of banh cuon, a kilo of extra weight and enough sugar to dissolve a few dozen teeth, our food tour adventure in Hanoi was over. The verdict? Take one to see an alternate side to the busy city.

# Hanoi street food



[Browse places to stay.](#)

## LOGISTICS

- Three of the tours we tried were group ones, with participants ranging in number from three to five. Three is a good number, five is pushing it, and eight would be too many.
- It's inevitable that tours will sometimes end up at well-documented venues. Inevitable in part because these are often well-known spots for a reason: the food's good.
- A wet market, or street market, should be a must-see on any visit to Vietnam, certainly for a food lover, and visiting with a knowledgeable guide is recommended. So it makes sense to include it with a street food tour.

Hanoi is probably one of those few rare cities of the world where it's hard to find a truly bad meal, but by the same token, to find the best of the best you may need a local helping hand. We've tried five street food tours in the past few years to work out which ones were best for which kinds of people.

If budget is not a consideration, then without question we recommend the exceptional Hanoi Street Food Tours. The Hanoi Cooking Centre's tour was also excellent. If you want a more budget-friendly tour then you'll need to join a group. In general, quality decreases as price decreases, but that's not to say that you should avoid the cheaper options, which can also be good experiences.

The two more expensive tours went to less touristy places; tours usually but not always include a stop at a market, and the quality of commentary can vary from tour to tour as well.

If you have any kind of special requests or want to cover a particular aspect of Vietnamese cuisine, you'll need to book a private tour.

In general expect to pay from around \$25 for a group tour to \$75 for a private tour. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Small birds in cans of beer.*



# Hoi An motorbiking



Be it exploring the stunning coastline around the Son Tra Peninsula or riding the Ho Chi Minh Trail on the back of a Belorussian Minsk, Hoi An makes for a great base for a lot more than some relaxed beach time and some cheap tailoring.

# Hoi An motorbiking

## LOGISTICS

- ✓ Hoi An Motorbike Adventures is our number one choice when it comes to selecting an operator in Hoi An.
- ✓ If you do choose the Easy Rider option, do your research and ask around – firsthand word of mouth recommendations are more trustworthy than the customer comments books that get thrust in your face.
- ✓ If you choose to ride yourself, bear in mind that motorbiking in Vietnam is not for novices and the conditions can be challenging.
- ✓ Check your travel insurance small print before doing a motorbike tour in Vietnam.

The feeling of riding up a steep mountain and hitting a rapid temperature drop amid mountain clouds before turning a corner to a peak basked in sunshine, with the landscape of rural Vietnam stretching as far as the eye can see, is a mighty fine one. Hoi An is a great base to do rides like this from.

For multi-day trips, with almost 1,000 miles of remote backwater paths and trails, paddy, narrow mountain passes, isolated hill tribe villages and dense jungle, Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh Trail is one of the most rewarding and directionally challenging rides in the country.

For shorter trips, the Hai Van Pass and Son Tra peninsula are both within day-trip distance of Hoi An, and to get there you'll pass through some beautiful local countryside. Although some routes are fairly straightforward with a good map, the roads and the bikes available to rent locally can be in variable condition and the money spent on a good guide who knows the route well is a great investment for peace of mind.

It also ensures you don't miss out on the best bits as you concentrate on hairpin corners and speeding trucks. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*My Son is one easily approachable motorbike destination from Hoi An.*



# Thac Ba Lake



It would be unfair to compare Thac Ba and its lake, 170 kilometres northwest of Hanoi, to Ha Long Bay -- although some do -- but its beauty is jaw dropping and we'd highly recommend a stop if you're making your own way to Sapa or keen on exploring off the usual tourist trail.

# Thac Ba Lake

## LOGISTICS

- The lake can be reached by bus or train from Hanoi or Sapa to Yen Bai from where you'll need to arrange a xe om or a taxi to the lake.
- La Vie Vu Linh is an eco-lodge and sustainable development project that makes for a fantastic place to stay for a few days.
- If you're looking to travel a little off the beaten track, this is an ideal way to break up the trip from Hanoi to Sapa – a trip that nearly everyone else does by overnight train, missing the scenery along the way.

About five to six hours north of Hanoi, Thac Ba Lake and its surrounds is considered an area of ecological and cultural importance in Vietnam. The region is home to a number of ethnic minority groups, notably the Dao but also Tay, Nung, Thai, Muong, Giay and others, with many living along the banks of the lake, earning a living from its waters.

The area also has historical significance: in 1285 the Thu Vat Battle took place against Mongolian invaders and during the American war Thuy Tien cave was the base of Yen Bai provincial committee.

The lake, created when the Thac Ba Hydropower Plant was constructed on the Chay River, covers more than 23,000 hectares and is 80 kilometres long, up to 10 kilometres wide and reaches 42 metres down at its deepest point. The landscape is stunning, with 1,331 islands, mostly covered in forest, and still, clear water.

Boat trips and treks are possible around the lake and as you float around between the islands or look down on the lake from one of the vantage points, it's strange to think that this whole area was once a valley where people lived and worked. The many islands would once have been hills and mountains. [Read more on Travelfish.org.](#)



*Shades of blue.*



# About this guide



This is a [Travelfish.org](https://www.travelfish.org) guidebook. We've been writing about Southeast Asia since 2004 and have most likely wasted more weekends trying to find interesting things to do than you have.

# About this guide

## ABOUT THE EDITOR

- **Stuart McDonald**  
After penning hard-copy guidebooks to Vietnam and Thailand in the 1990s, Stuart McDonald turned his attention online to co-found Travelfish.org in 2004. He's lived in Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia, where he is now based. He can sleep anywhere, anytime – even on the old road to Bokor. His favourite read is *The Art of Travel* by Alain de Botton and don't get him started on hotels that charge for WiFi.

## About this guide

52 Weekends is a collection of on the ground research by Travelfish.org writers. All destinations mentioned in were visited, in person, by a Travelfish.org researcher and all research was undertaken independently. Travelfish.org always pays its way. No exceptions.

## Photos

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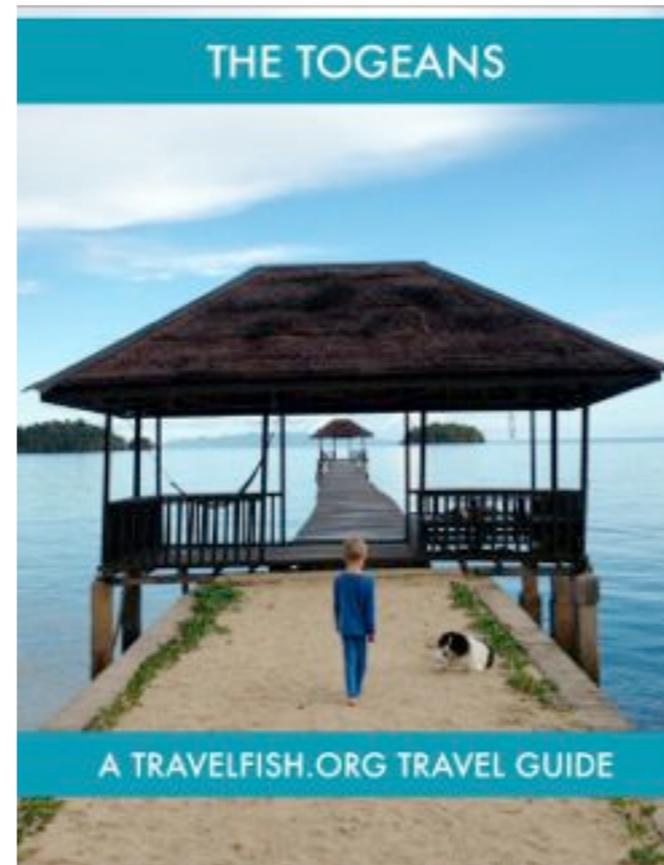
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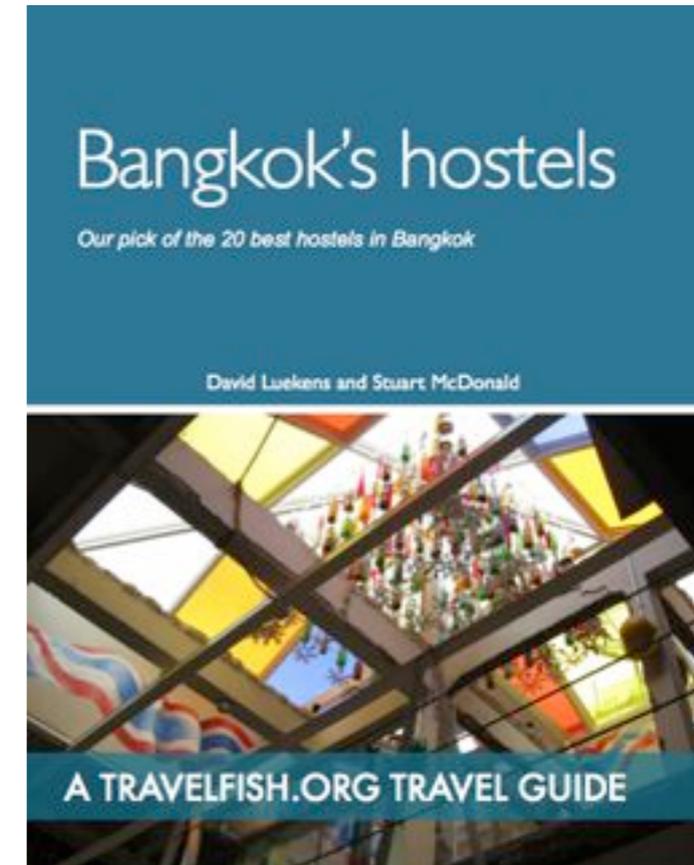
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