

Uncharted ASIA

Ancient ruins, unspoiled beaches, and distinct wildlife adventures define these four emerging destinations in the East.

by PAUL RUBIO

Recovering from previous political, social, and/or economic turmoil, new regions in the Orient are opening their doors to travelers, proving there's a whole lot of Asian extraordinary left to discover. Newfound confidence has opened the floodgates of investment, instigating a love affair between luxury tourism and several of the continent's unspoiled corners. Here, four mind-blowing Asian destinations to explore before they veer onto the beaten path. ▷



Photo: Markus Cortz

ANGKOR, CAMBODIA

Live out your Indiana Jones/Lara Croft fantasy at ruins gone rogue.

If you've explored the ruins of Pompeii, Ephesus, Acropolis, Giza, Tikal, or Machu Picchu and feel like you've seen the best archaeology has to offer, look further. Like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, the ancient city of Angkor plays out one thrilling chapter after the next, as you navigate across a whopping 40-plus square miles of Cambodian jungle in search of the 300 Hindu and Buddhist monuments linking the Khmer empire (9th-15th centuries) with present day. Unlike its veneered peers, Angkor is buried beneath a web of dense undergrowth, lending to gotta-see-it-to-believe vistas of stone-hewn temples capped by mammoth tree roots and plant-clad walls etched with illustrations of history and religious allegory.

Beyond the main temple complex of Angkor Wat, in the quieter nooks of the world's largest pre-industrial city, you might subconsciously begin looking for secret passageways, hidden doors, snake-guarded treasure chests, and small clues to understanding the enigmas of the city. It is then, when reality and make-believe begin to blur, that you've experienced the magic of Angkor.



VITALS:

Days to spend: 2-3.

Nearest international airport: The Siem Reap International Airport (REP) is a 15-minute taxi or 25-minute *tuk-tuk* to the principal hotel zone.

Visa: Obtain a visa on arrival, or skip the queues and get an e-visa in advance (evisa.gov.kh).

When: November through March.

TO DO:

- Angkor Wat, the iconic, spired temple complex that stands as the world's largest religious monument and the foremost example of Khmer architecture, wows and enchants, most photogenic during sunrise and sunset hours (from the east and west entrances, respectively). Helicopters and hot-air balloons offer a bird's-eye view.
- Climb through the rocky remains of the Buddhist monument Bayon, comprised of 54 pillars, many engraved with enormous smirking faces. Study the meticulous inscribing on the walls, which depicts daily life and the colorful history of the Khmer kingdom.
- Strike a pose for the ultimate Instagram shot in front of the overgrown tree roots strangling the ruins of Ta Prohm temple.
- Ask your *tuk-tuk* driver—you'll be hiring one to get you around the ruins—to show you some of the less frequented sites, including the 10th-century Banteay Srei ("citadel of women") temple, constructed principally of red sandstone and dedicated to the Hindu goddess Shiva. This is your chance for personal moments with the ancient city.
- Feel the pulse of modern-day Cambodia at the Siem Reap night market, where you'll gorge on cheap but delicious street eats, bargain for souvenirs, and squirm during a \$3 fish pedicure (yes, the one where the fish eat your dead skin, leaving your feet shining like mother-of-pearl).

STAY:

In the last decade, the tourism industry surrounding Angkor has exploded, placing Angkor on the tail end of its "emerging" status. With the Khmer Rouge a distant memory and the complete demining around Angkor and the proximate town of Siem Reap, visitors now number more than 2 million per year. As an active destination that typically commands two to three nights on the Asia travel circuit, Angkor isn't the type of place for unapologetic lingering (and dropping \$1,000 on a hotel room you'll rarely be in). **Anantara Siem Reap** (from \$179, angkor.anantara.com), which debuted in January 2014 and still stands as the latest entry to the region's luxury hotel market, provides just the right amount of frills for relaxing and recharging after daily adventures without a price tag that evokes guilt. Fashioned after a grand Khmer villa, the 39-key boutique hotel is built around a serene courtyard and saltwater pool. Its Khmer spa and local cooking school are idyllic intermissions between temple hopping. >

Previous: Sunrise in the Golden Triangle. These pages, *clockwise from below:* Sunrise over Angkor Wat; a Buddhist monk at Bayon; the east entrance to Angkor Wat; the pool-lined courtyard at Anantara Siem Reap; monkey statues guard the entrance to Banteay Srei temple.



Photos: (Opposite top) Gallery Stock; (opposite bottom) Mlemy/Stock. (This page bottom) Ivanmateev/Stock.

KOH RONG ARCHIPELAGO, CAMBODIA

Virgin islands await couples looking for undiscovered shores.

On an isle in the Koh Rong archipelago, a small series of islands some 15 miles south of the Cambodian mainland, the private island resort of Song Saa endows the Gulf of Thailand with a slice of Bora Bora-style luxury (its overwater bungalows are the idyllic accommodations everyone dreams about). The islands of Koh Rong are lush and completely wild, evoking fantasies of massive proportions. Put in perspective, the island chain's second-largest island, Koh Rong proper, is roughly the size of Hong Kong but with a human population numbering below 2,500. The rest of the islands, besides Koh Ouen, home to Song Saa, remain uninhabited. While easily combined with a trip to Angkor, the Koh Rong archipelago stands alone as a superlative, hidden beach destination on any sojourn through Asia.

VITALS:

Days to spend: 3-4.

Nearest international airport: Phnom Penh International Airport (PNH). From there, it's a 3.5-hour drive south to the coastal town of Sihanoukville, where you'll board a private boat and sail 30 minutes to reach the archipelago. If already in Cambodia and coming from Siem Reap, avoid the driving portion and fly domestically into Sihanoukville Airport (KOS).

Visa: Obtain a visa on arrival, or skip the queues and get an e-visa in advance (evisa.gov.kh).

When: November to April. Peak water clarity (and the best diving and snorkeling) is between October and November and again April to May.

TO DO:

- Perfect the art of doing nothing, feet in the sand, or feet planted in your private swimming pool that overlooks the surrounding cerulean waters and verdant landscape.
- Ask the staff to pack lunch and Champagne, then set off via kayak to find your own private cove for a romantic afternoon.
- Take a boat over to Koh Rong to experience daily life in the coastal Cambodian village of Prek Svay. Through the Sala Song Saa excursion, visit a local school or farm and check out the community projects established in association with Song Saa, such as the implementation of a waste management system in the village.
- Hike the nature trails of Koh Bong island, and keep a lookout for the resident Oriental pied hornbills. Or dive one of the six surrounding dive sites and encounter rainbows of tropical fish aplenty.



Clockwise from left: An ocean-view villa; an aerial view; and an unspoiled beach, all at Song Saa.



STAY:

Song Saa (all-inclusive from \$1,440 double occupancy per night; songsaa.com) is a destination in and of itself. The resort, which opened in 2012, remains the sole five-star establishment in southern Cambodia. Its 27 overwater thatched-roof villas are super-fashionable yet understated. Each villa sports subtle, eco-chic design elements like artwork created from discarded oil drums and fishing boat hulls, tables and chairs crafted from driftwood and tree trunks, and double-story, hand-carved wooden doors. More overt pops of glamour also surface: minibars fashioned from Louis Vuitton trunks, glass-bottom floors, and hyper-seductive outdoor shower areas. The resort delivers every island amenity imaginable, from a beachfront gymnasium to a hilltop alfresco spa to a seductive, feet-in-the-sand-type restaurant, as well as a stylish overwater bar and restaurant. Beyond the frills—and an aesthetic that rivals the best of French Polynesia and the Maldives—it is also the essence of the stunning Koh Rong archipelago, a place where nature is to be appreciated slowly and quietly.

Bonus: Inquire about Song Saa's Pack for a Purpose program, which benefits the Song Saa Foundation. You'll hand-deliver an extra suitcase filled with much-needed school supplies and teaching tools to the remote island villages. You've never seen children get so excited over pencils, textbooks, and notebooks. It's truly a beautiful experience. ▷



THE SOUTH COAST, SRI LANKA

Untamed paradise for families, couples, and solo travelers eager to explore new terrain before it's claimed by globalization.

A never-ending coastline where leopards roam and blue whales breach offshore; Buddhist temples punctuate the shore and centuries-old forts retell a fascinating history; massive, alien-like fruit trees and towering palms hug the sand; beach hours pass without another human in sight. This is all part of Sri Lanka's undeveloped south coast: a 150-mile stretch of exotica that feels plucked from travel diaries of yesteryear.

Though its waters may not be as crystalline as the neighboring Maldives and its infrastructure not as polished as resort areas like Bali and Phuket, southern Sri Lanka's combination of palm-laced beaches, charismatic fauna, and religious and historic sights—peppered with palpable joie de vivre following 2009's end to the 26-year civil war, in 2009—make this one of today's most interesting and distinctive travel destinations.

VITALS:

Days to spend: 7.

Nearest international airport: Bandaranaike/Colombo International Airport (CMB) is the country's busiest international airport. From there, it's approximately a two-hour drive to Galle, where the south coast commences.

Visa: Obtain your visa online several weeks before entering the country (eta.gov.lk).

When: December to March.

TO DO:

- Zigzag through the narrow streets of Galle, a historic walled city erected by the Portuguese in the 16th century and completed by the Dutch in the 17th century. Pop into the funky boutiques, edgy galleries, poet-frequented cafes, and eclectic restaurants within this immaculately restored UNESCO World Heritage Site.

- Sip the world's most expensive tea, Virgin White Tea, at Hundungoda Tea Estate. At about \$800 per pound, the tea, said to be richer in antioxidants than any other beverage, is harvested with golden scissors using a folkloric Imperial method.
- Order local when dining, and ambush your taste buds with the likes of spicy crab curry with pulao (seasoned) rice; carrot and coconut sambal (grated carrot salad); ridged gourd curry (made from the young fruit of a cucumber-like luffa vine before it matures into its familiar sponge format); brinjal moju (a savory eggplant stew); and watalappan (a variation of sweet coconut custard cake).
- In the town of Weligama, gawk at the island's traditional stilt fishermen in quest of daily catch high atop their crucifixes and watch local surfers hang ten on the waves.
- During whale season, from November to April, head offshore from the town of Mirissa for a rare chance to see earth's largest creatures, blue whales, splashing about, often accompanied by the likes of orcas, fin whales, whale sharks, and dolphins.
- Cross a footbridge from the mainland in Matara to arrive at the overwater Parevi Dupatha Buddhist temple, attached to its own private island.
- Amble along the beaches of Dickwella and Tangalle, where craggy coastlines give way to magically wide swathes of desolate beach, draped with soaring palm trees bent at 45-degree angles.
- Experience Sri Lanka's safari circuit at Yala National Park, teeming with indigenous mega fauna like leopards, elephants, and crocodiles. Similar to an African safari, twice-daily game drives and prize-worthy leopard shots are par for the course (though *Out of Africa*-style coddling has yet to make it here and activities are priced on an à la carte basis).

Photo: Paul Rubio



Clockwise from opposite: Sunrise on the beach; sunset in the pavilion at Ani Villas; the footbridge to the overwater Parevi Dupatha Buddhist temple; a suite at Ani Villas.

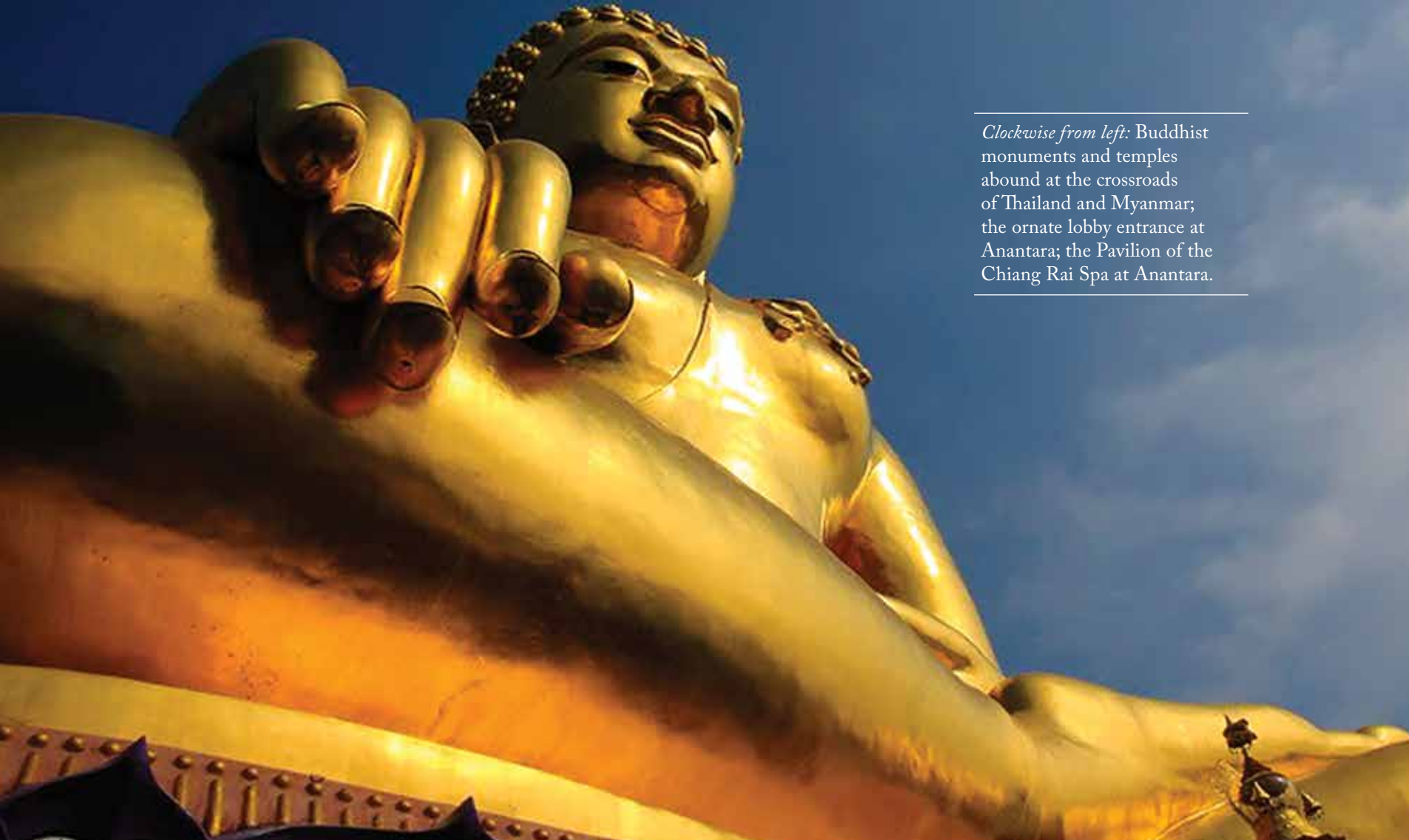
STAY:

In the last year, Sri Lanka's south coast has leapfrogged from a budget destination to the stratosphere of ultra-luxury, thanks mainly to the debut of two high-end newcomers: **Ani Villas Sri Lanka** and **Cape Weligama**.

Cast over five acres above incredibly picturesque, palm-fringed Dickwella beach, Ani Villas Sri Lanka (from \$3,000 per night for a seven-bedroom estate; anivillas.com) unfolds as a duo of high-design villas, Divia and Monara, each functioning as a fully serviced luxury resort. A private staff of 12 ensures an endless supply of epicurean meals, fine wines, spa treatments, personal training sessions, tennis lessons, and beachside and poolside pampering (all is included in the price, even unlimited spa treatments). The expansive enclave, which debuted this past August, is an ambitious fusion of indoors and outdoors, deftly capturing panoramas of sea and sky from nearly every nook and revealing an understated aesthetic as envisioned by Reda Amalou, a style that recalls some of the greatest coastal properties in the Six Senses and Aman portfolios. Within each villa, clean-lined bedroom measures 683 to 1,482 square feet apiece and amenities include a full-size, lounge-lined swimming pool, living sala, library, wine cellar, and personal pool bar.

Twenty miles west, the village of Weligama, whose name translates to "Sandy Village," welcomed its first five-star hotel in October 2014: Cape Weligama (all-inclusive from \$570; capeweligama.com). Thai architect Lek Bunnag (Phulay Bay, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, and Four Seasons Resort Langkawi) designed the all-villa, 39-key resort over 12 cliff-top acres, and the results are nothing short of spectacular. This fusion of Thai and Sri Lankan modern elegance plays out over towering open-aired pavilions; a series of sleek, high-design pools; and tastefully appointed, explorer-themed villas—all in constant view of the lush shoreline below. The resort is a sister property to **Ceylon Tea Trails** (from \$437; teatrails.com), a collection of early 19th-century colonial bungalows in the heart of Sri Lanka's mountainous tea country, where the agenda includes plenty of tea tasting, hiking and biking the mountainous terrain, river rafting, and visiting the temples of the sacred city of Kandy.

Though possible to approach Yala National Park as a long day-trip from Ani Villas or Cape Weligama, **Cinnamon Wild Yala** game lodge (from \$175 per night, cinnamonhotels.com), on the outskirts of the national park, is a rustic yet comfortable base for in-depth wildlife pursuits to see leopards, elephants, crocodiles, macaques, peacocks, and other exotic birdlife. Likewise, those seeking immersion into Galle's antiquity and artsy vibe should allot a night or two at the 30-room **Amangalla** (from \$600 per night; amanresorts.com), located within the walled city. ▶



Clockwise from left: Buddhist monuments and temples abound at the crossroads of Thailand and Myanmar; the ornate lobby entrance at Anantara; the Pavilion of the Chiang Rai Spa at Anantara.



VITALS:

Days to spend: 3.

Nearest international airport: Bangkok-Suvarnabhumi (BKK) or Don Mueang (DMK). Connect on a domestic flight to Thailand's northernmost airport, Chiang Rai (CEI), not to be confused with Chiang Mai. From Chiang Rai, it's an hour drive to the Golden Triangle.

Visa: No visa is required for travel to Thailand. A day visa for Myanmar can be obtained at the Thai-Myanmar border, and a day visa for Laos can be obtained at the Thai-Laos border.

When: November to March.

TO DO:

- Bond with rescued elephants and their mahouts (elephant keepers) at the headquarters of the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation, located within Anantara's 160-acre estate. During the "Mahout Experience," for example, ride an elephant through the jungle, take a crash course in elephant training (learning the basics: walk, stop, turn, and sit down), and take a river bath with your new 10,000-pound best friend.
- Request "Dining by Design" at the Baby Elephant Camp and feed the young elephants their dinner before a private chef prepares your own gourmet Thai meal under a thatched-roof hut in the middle of the wilderness.
- Grab your passport and take full advantage of the hotel's unique geographic positioning to enter neighboring Myanmar. Cross the border and watch Myanmar's vibrant local markets come to life, observe almsgiving to the monks, ogle at the glittering gold Buddhist temples, and meet plenty of curious and friendly locals wondering why you've decided to visit (you are likely to be the only Westerner they see all day).
- Hop aboard a traditional longtail boat and glide past local villages, rice paddies, and religious relics along the Mekong River. Pop into Laos for a quick visit if you want to tick one more country off your list.

STAY:

Straddling the utmost northwest corner of Thailand, the 63-room, all-inclusive **Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort** (all-inclusive from \$990; anantara.com) serves as an ambassador to the elusive and beguiling Golden Triangle. With so many excursions on offer, days here tend to be on the active side. However, the resort also warrants ample time for unapologetic R&R. That fabulous three-country vista extends throughout the entire property, forming an idyllic backdrop for indigenous treatments in the resort's Chiang Rai spa, extended meals in the dining pavilion, and cocktails in the infinity-edged swimming pool. And the resident elephants ... they know how to relax, too. You can even join them for yoga or coffee on the main terrace. It's just a typical morning on an unexpected trip of a lifetime. ♦

GOLDEN TRIANGLE, THAILAND

Land of the elephants, crossroad of cultures for the young and young at heart.

In the hotel world, there's a room with a view; and then there's a room with a million-dollar view. And then there is the Anantara Golden Triangle Elephant Camp & Resort, whose rooms overlook the "Golden Triangle," or crossroads of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos, and the awe-inspiring elephant country below. Showcasing a beauty that is at once tangible and intangible, this is arguably Asia's most profound—and complex—panorama; one where the Mekong and Ruak rivers converge, where rehabilitated elephants rove the mist-shrouded hills, and where colorful and diverse hill tribes from different ethnic groups and nationalities waiver between tradition and modernity. While the larger Golden Triangle region hasn't entirely shed its dark history of illicit opium production and contraband, Thailand's sector has swapped poppy fields for eco-tourism, reestablishing itself as a hub for rescued elephants and culture-infused jungle escapes. Organizing your own experiences here can prove difficult; as such, hotels like the aforementioned Anantara property arrange all activities and build excursions into the price of accommodation.



Photos: (Bottom) Markus Gortz.

