

Secrets of the Orient

Adventure

Finding adventure in Asia is easy – the real question is what kind of thrill do you want? Luxury hotels in remote locations can provide a sense of adventure – but also a good gin and tonic at sundown and five-star service.

The Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle in Thailand has 15 tents designed by American Bill Bensley overlooking the Ruak River. The hotel is said to have the flair to rival its sister hotel, Four Seasons Resort in Chiang Mai, but has the seclusion and edge to make it feel like an adventure.

Far more secluded, but just as luxurious, is the Banyan Tree resort in Ringha, Tibet, housed in a mansion in the foothills of the vast central Tibetan plateau. Go there and you might spend a day trekking through the magical landscape or lazing around in the outdoor Jacuzzi.

For luxury adventure, try the Oberoi Vanyavilas in Rajasthan, India. It has a luxury tented camp and promises tiger sightings in May and June. In Indonesia, Amanwana on the nature reserve of Moyo Island has five-star luxury surrounded by tropical rainforest. If it's a thrill you're after, the US-based company Incredible Adventures can arrange flights over Moscow in a sound barrier-breaking fighter jet, the MiG.

For a truly unique holiday, the best person to turn to is of the new breed of 'super agents.' These people, with their bulging contact books and local knowledge, can get unprecedented access to a country's hidden sites. Wild Frontiers, started by Jonny Bealby, takes travellers to countries other travel agents wouldn't touch, such as Mongolia, Syria, Afghanistan, Georgia, Libya and parts of Central Asia. But it is the Pan-Himalayan experience – trips through Pakistan, India, Bhutan and Tibet – for which Wild Frontiers is best known.

Thailand's Four Seasons resort overlooks the calming presence of the Ruak River.

Asia has always captured the imagination, but as the region has opened up to mass tourism, you have to look harder to find the best the continent has to offer. James Drury explores the concepts of adventure, culture and luxury for the discerning traveller.



Adventure

Four Seasons Tented Camp

Golden Triangle

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www.fourseasons.com/goldentriangle

Banyan Tree resort

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Website: www.banyantree.com

Oberoi Vanyavilas

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Culture

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Imperial Tours

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798 Dashanzi Art District

Tel: +86 10 6436 2109

Commune at the Great Wall

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Asia's rich culture offers dazzling architecture, a thriving art scene and numerous culinary delights.

Culture

If a taste of Asia's rich culture is what interests you, then it's worth having Guy Rubin's phone number in your address book. He runs Beijing-based Imperial Tours with his Korean-American wife, Nancy Kim, and organises various tours of China, including a culinary tour which comes highly recommended.

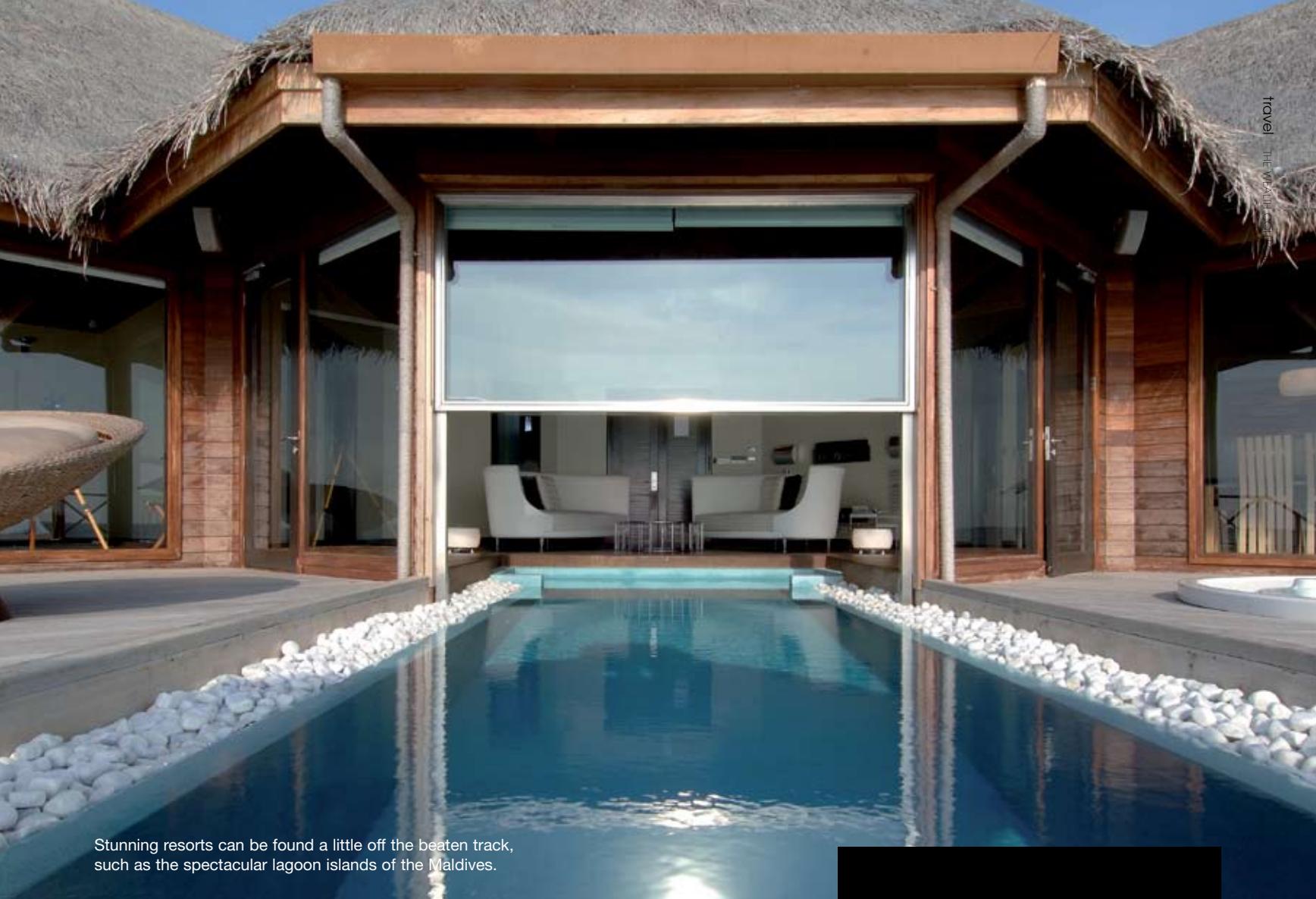
The tours take visitors to the capitals of the four regions of Chinese cuisine: the northern plains, the Yangtse region in the east, the Cantonese south and the Szechwan and Hunan provinces in the west. One day you might be enjoying a Peking duck banquet at the China Club in Beijing and another day be taking a lesson in Shanghai cuisine from one of the country's top chefs.

For contemporary art, China is fast becoming a major player on the international scene. The hub of this coveted industry is in the Dashanzi art district in Beijing. The area houses a thriving artistic community and is well worth a trip to look around.

But for a more civilised and relaxing way to enjoy China's cultural scene, the best place to visit is the magnificent Hotel of Modern Art in Guilin, which is home to a leading collection of contemporary Asian art – and set in absolutely breathtaking surroundings to boot.

For architecture enthusiasts, Commune at the Great Wall is essentially an exhibition of the work of Asia's 12 hottest architects. A husband and wife team of developers, Zhang Xin and Pan Shiyi, gave 12 leading architects \$1 million to create their own fantasy home, using only Chinese construction materials.

The result is a truly startling collection of 42 unique villas near a private strip of The Great Wall, where visitors can enjoy a solitary stroll, miles away from the hustle and bustle of the tourist hordes.



Stunning resorts can be found a little off the beaten track, such as the spectacular lagoon islands of the Maldives.

Luxury

There is no shortage of luxury holidays available in Asia. In every Asian country it is possible to find beautiful hotels with impeccable service and sumptuous bedrooms. It takes a little more searching, however, to find a similar level of luxury in an experience that is also a little off the beaten track.

James Jayasundera is the founder of Ampersand Travel, and his speciality is trips to the Indian subcontinent, particularly Sri Lanka. He can give his clients an 'in' to the most exclusive properties on the island, partly because he is half Sri Lankan by birth and can count some of the country's swankiest private villa owners as friends.

He can also point out the best properties for rent – including colonial plantation houses, a traditional Balinese house and villas with spectacular ocean views – as well as advising on which hotels are on the up and which are past their best.

Again, Guy Rubin from Imperial Tours can organise deluxe tours of China from Lhasa to Xi'an – and he only books clients into hotels that pass Western standards of luxury.

Another idea for a luxury expedition might be to go on one of Abercrombie & Kent's private jet tours. Aboard a brand-new Airbus 319CJ, travellers can visit ten Indian cities in three weeks. And because the jet can land at smaller airports, on its own routes and timetables, remote destinations can be easily reached without the exhaustion that remote travel usually entails.

For something perfectly relaxing and luxurious, the Rania Experience on Hithaffiniva Magu in the Maldives is the answer. It is a private seven-acre island with a luxury yacht attached and can house a maximum of nine guests at a time. The package also comes with the dedicated service of a full complement of staff, including a private chef, PADI dive instructor, spa therapist, butler and crew. Also, try The Lalu on the shores of Sun Moon Lake in Taiwan, with its spectacular location and stylish architecture.

Whatever you are looking for in your trip eastwards, there is certainly plenty to be found if you know where to look. ■

Luxury

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Abercrombie & Kent

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The Rania Experience

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