

A full-page background image showing a person in mid-dive, falling through a large, dark, natural rock archway. The water below is a vibrant turquoise color, and the sky visible through the arch is blue with some clouds. The rock formations are dark and rugged, with some green vegetation on the upper parts.

Dive

Into

Asia

INDONESIA
Bali Highs

Skirt around the tourist hordes on the 11-day "Indonesia-Bali" active excursion with Austin Adventures. Within one of the most diverse countries in the world, you'll hear many dialects as you hop between Bali and Java, surfing, biking, hiking, and beaching. Sip on *kopi* (coffee), pick up batik textiles, and visit centuries-old temples. austinadventures.com

Tours of a Lifetime: 20 guided trips, from Uzbekistan to Indonesia, that uncover hidden depths, secluded shrines, and idyllic islands

BY **NORIE QUINTOS**

To unlock the secrets of a faraway place, it helps to have an expert guide by your side. For more than 10 years, *Traveler* has tracked top outfitters and tour companies that illuminate the world. What differentiates the very best trips? Small groups, knowledgeable guides, a well-curated itinerary, a sensible pace, and sustainable practices. In this issue, we look eastward for new discoveries that—to paraphrase the great 14th-century explorer Ibn Battuta—will leave you speechless and then turn you into a storyteller.



In South Korea, UNESCO World Heritage site Gyeongju was an ancient dynastic capital known for its artisans. Visitors can still visit Donggung Palace on the banks of Wolji Pond.

BHUTAN

Calling All Goddesses

A country whose first highway was constructed only in the 1960s, Bhutan is an old culture easing into modernity on its own terms. Wild Women Expeditions navigates it expertly on its 13-day “Spirit of Bhutan” tour along the scenic Bumdra Monastery Trek, or Trek of One Thousand Dakinis (in Sanskrit, a *dakini* is a female deity). Meet local women at community storytelling sessions, and try your hand at archery. wildwomenexpeditions.com

BORNEO

Saving the Orangutan

Although the island of Borneo is shared by three countries (Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei), monkeys, birds, and small carnivores cross borders with ease. On the Malaysian side of the island, Nat Geo Expeditions’ 11-day “Borneo Wildlife Adventure” leads guests through the orangutan rehabilitation center at Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve, on elevated walks through treetops, and on a climb to a mud volcano. Stays include two nights at one of Nat Geo’s Unique Lodges of the World, Sukau Rainforest Lodge. natgeoexpeditions.com/explore

CHINA

Yummy Yunnan

During WildChina’s founder-guided “Travels Through Dali With Mei Zhang” tour in December, Zhang will personally show off her lake-front hometown in China’s southern Yunnan Province, where you’ll meet the ham curers, cheese-makers, artisans, and entrepreneurs whose stories are recorded in her new book. “It’s a chance for me to go back and say thank you to those villagers,” she says. The seven-day experience also runs as a custom tour with a WildChina guide. wildchina.com

HONG KONG

Island Idyll

Little Adventures in Hong Kong ferries you out of the urban scene and off guidebook on its “Island Life: The Slow, Magical World of Peng Chau” day tour. Many locals have never even heard of this temple-studded island (complete with friendly fishermen). It’s five hours of pirate tales, temple wandering, and—surprise—sand between your toes. littleadventuresinhongkong.com

INDIA

Worlds of Devotion

On Wildland Adventures’ 10-day “Diving Into Immortality” trip, visit some of India’s holiest cities, including Amritsar and Varanasi, before joining one of the largest spiritual gatherings in the world. More than 75 million devotees congregate in Allahabad for Kumbh Mela, a Hindu festival lasting 90 days during which seekers dive into the sacred waters of the Ganges River. The tour company scores an exclusive pass for this UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage ritual. wildland.com

Tiger Woods

India’s Sundarbans delta is the world’s largest coastal mangrove forest, known for its endangered “man-eating” tigers. You might catch a glimpse of one from a safe distance during Myths and Mountains’ 13-day “READ India: West Bengal and Cruising the Sunderbans” tour. Visit crocodile- and tiger-rescue centers, learn about local muslin weaving, and dine on regional seafood. mythsandmountains.com

INDONESIA

How to Trail a Dragon

You’ll get to lounge (though not too close) with the largest lizards on Earth, Komodo dragons, during Wilderness Travel’s 11-day “Komodo Snorkeling Expedition.” Your base is a comfortable two-masted ship sailing through the Coral Triangle waters of Indonesia. “This trip was designed with snorkelers in mind,” says the outfitter’s Barbara Banks. “Marine biologists and locally based leaders bring the coral world to life for travelers.” wildernesstravel.com

IRAN

Persian Plates

Despite a travel warning from the U.S. State Department, Iran’s doors have been open to American travelers for about 30 years—and there’s no better way to cross cultures than through plate and palate on Iran Doostan’s 11-day “Persian Sofre” trip. It’s a culinary romp with dollops of traditional Iranian flavors—saffron, tamarind, and pomegranate. Get a kebab fix at the Tajrish bazaar, and observe the delicate distilling of rose water during the harvest season (early May to mid-June). Sprinkle in visits

to two UNESCO World Heritage sites. irandoostan.com

JAPAN

Zen Kitchen

Oku Japan hits all the top spots—Kyoto, Tokyo, Osaka—during its “Japan’s Culinary Heritage” tour, but the company offers a new way to see them. The itinerary ranges from urban markets and breweries to the places where food stories begin: orderly vegetable fields, fishing ports, and earthen ovens. Culinary experts and serious growers will share their secrets in 11 days of custom behind-the-scenes workshops. okujapan.com

JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA

From Shinto to Samurai

On Zegrahm’s 17-day “Treasures of Japan With South Korea” tour, board the 100-passenger *Caledonian Sky* for a journey filled with sacred sites and natural wonders in coastal towns and villages. In Japan, soak in Beppu’s hot springs and learn to make soba noodles on Sado Island. In South Korea, visit Gyeongju, an ancient dynastic capital admired for artistry in wood, metal, and stone. zegrahm.com

LAOS

On Two Wheels and Two Feet

Adventure Life’s “Laos in Motion” is a nine-day customizable tour through a country overshadowed by its more visited neighbors. From participating in private “calling of the soul” ceremonies to watching the diminutive Asian sun bear tussle in its native habitat, this active trip of biking, kayaking, and climbing culminates in a special hike to orchid fields, where the ephemeral blooms sprout only a few days a year. adventure-life.com

MYANMAR

Focus Group

Where better to break in that new lens than the gilded pagodas of Myanmar? Nat Geo’s 12-day “The Heart of Myanmar” tour brings this Southeast Asian nation—which was overlooked as a destination for decades—into focus, from its largest city, Yangon, to its village-inlaid mountains. Our advice? Say yes to the optional hot-air balloon ride over the Bagan plain for the ultimate shot. natgeoexpeditions.com/explore



MONGOLIA
Galloping Across the Steppe

Nat Geo Expeditions' "Mongolian Horse Trek" transports you right into the land of Genghis Khan, where rugged steeds take you to mythical places. Starting off with two nights in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, the 14-day tour then heads into the countryside. Feast (and even fish) with your hosts, try out traditional bows and arrows, and attend a local festival for throat singing and fiddle performances. The guides, an anthropologist and photographer couple, "know this land intimately, having summered in ger camps here since their grown sons were young children," says Laura Farrell of Nat Geo Expeditions. natgeoexpeditions.com/explore



TUUL AND BRUNO MORANDI (ALL); PREVIOUS PAGES: JONNY MELON (BALI), HEMIS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (PALACE)



Wandering soul: One of the world's last surviving nomadic cultures lives amid the stark beauty of Mongolia's varied landscapes, from the dunes of Zavkhan Province (this page) to the windswept eastern steppes to western Bayan-Ölgii Province (opposite), where the majority of Mongolia's Kazakhs live.

NEPAL

Magic Kingdom

The trekking capital of the world is back in business after a devastating earthquake in 2015. Journey over mountainsides and into caverns during the 10-day “Myth of Mustang” tour from the Explorer’s Passage. From the capital, Kathmandu, go deep into the Himalaya, flying over one of the deepest gorges in the world and trekking through passes lined with shrines and prayer flags. Along the way you’ll learn of the tour’s namesake—not a horse, but a kingdom where legendary battles were fought against demons trying to prevent the spread of Buddhism to Tibet. [explorerspassage.com](#)

PAKISTAN

Himalayan Havens

Overturn all expectations of this country during GeoEx’s 20-day “Pakistan’s Hunza Valley” expedition. You’ll travel along the precipitous Karakoram Highway, one of the highest paved roads in the world. “The inhabitants of Gilgit-Baltistan created oases by carving channels out of the mountainsides by hand, redirecting glacier water,” says Corinne Edwards of GeoEx. Exchange tea and tales with your Ismaili hosts, and if you’re lucky, you might catch a glimpse of the elusive brown bear and the even rarer snow leopard. [geoex.com](#)

SRI LANKA

Ceylon Safari

Over 11 days on a “Sri Lanka Wildlife Safari” with Natural Habitat Adventures, you’re bound to see playful troops of monkeys, muddy Asian elephants, and even blue whales. What really tops travelers’ lists? “A chance to encounter notoriously elusive leopards in the wild,” says Nat Hab’s Jennie Lay. [nathab.com](#)

THAILAND

Simply Siam

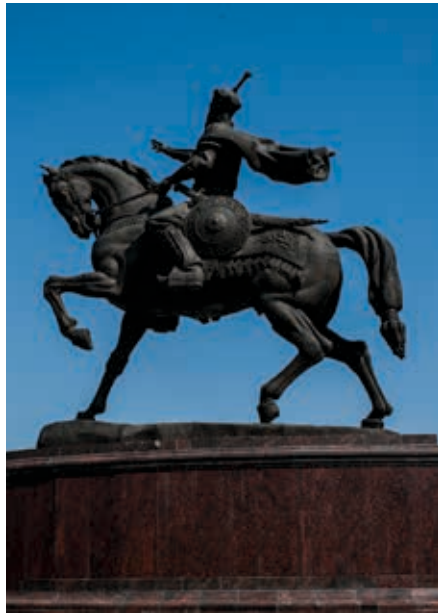
Most tours scratch the surface of the Land of Smiles, but Exotic Voyages’ three-day “Ban Talae Nok & Ton Kloy Hike” delves into customs and local life in coastal Ranong. Residents teach the art of hand-dyeing batik and weaving palm leaves. You’ll also hike with a guide to a waterfall. [exoticvoyages.prezly.com](#)

Traveler editor at large **NORIE QUINTOS** ([@noriecicerone](#)) spent her childhood in the Philippines, where one of her favorite spots is Bohol Island, with its tarsier sanctuary and famous geological formation, the Chocolate Hills.



TIMOR-LESTE (EAST TIMOR)
New Kid on the Block

Timor-Leste is the 21st century’s first declared sovereign state; understandably “tourism is still in an embryonic stage,” says Caroline Mongrain of World Expeditions. Nevertheless the company’s “East Timor Adventure” packs in picturesque rice fields, tumultuous history, and deeply held culture in 10 days. Explore the Portuguese-influenced capital, Dili; hike up the country’s tallest summit, Mount Tatamailau, to see the sunrise; and snorkel biodiverse waters. [worldexpeditions.com](#)



UZBEKISTAN
Meeting at a Crossroads

Surrounded by other “-stans,” landlocked Uzbekistan is home to the Silk Road cities Samarkand and Bukhara. The country’s strategic position bridging East and West has created a fascinating panoply of Soviet architecture, Chinese silks, and Iranian antiquities. For 10 days, MIR Corporation showcases them all in the “Backstreets and Bazaars of Uzbekistan” itinerary. From off-roading on red desert sands, to dancing amid the pastel pinks and yellows of a seasonal festival, to sifting through bright violet and lime textiles in the markets, this itinerary displays the whole spectrum of local color. mircorp.com



TUUL AND BRUNO MORANDI (ALL); PREVIOUS PAGES: DAVID KIRKLAND/DESIGN PICS (HUTS)

Uzbekistan beckons: Elaborate tilework decorates mausoleums in Shah-i-Zinda, Samarkand (this page). Opposite, clockwise from upper left: an Uzbek man in a traditional teahouse; a statue of national hero Timur in the capital, Tashkent; a woman at a wedding; tiles at Shah-i-Zinda; a man from Fergana Province, in the country’s east; the dome of the Tilla Kari Madrassa (a religious school), in Samarkand; a woman from the Qashqadaryo region in southern Uzbekistan; intricate patterns at the Tosh Hovli palace, in Khiva.

