The iNFORMER

STRATEGIES / INVESTIGATIONS / SPECIAL REPORTS

Temples at Cambodia's Angkor can be mobbed, but you'll have one almost to yourself if you choose well and time your visit wisely. From left: Tour groups swarm Bayon; dawn at Banteay Srey.

ASIA'S LAST EDENS

Asia's tourism boom is squeezing the charm—and even the culture—out of some of the continent's top destinations. CHRISTOPHER R. COX *reports from Cambodia and Laos on the best ways to find the road less traveled, and the rich rewards of going your own way*

NO ROADS LEAD TO BANteay Thom, but a 15-minute walk along earthen rice-paddy dikes delivers me to a grove of old-growth trees enfolding the 800-year-old temple that was discovered by Cambodian archaeologists in 1997. There's more than a touch of *Tomb Raider* to the ruins: stone walls strangled by the viselike roots of vaulting silk-cotton trees; crumbling laterite towers with intricate sandstone sculptures; and, best of all, almost total solitude.

Although I am less than two miles from several must-see temples on the heavily trafficked Angkor Archaeological Park's Grand Circuit, on this morning the only other visitors to Banteay Thom are my Khmer guide and a gaggle of young children from a nearby hamlet who've tagged along. Just a decade ago, it was possible to have this first-encounter feeling anywhere in the park, including at the magnificent Angkor Wat. The same held true for other iconic sights in Southeast Asia, like Luang Prabang in Laos and Vietnam's Halong Bay. But the region has become a tourism tiger thanks to relative political stability, improved infrastructure, a proliferation of low-cost airlines, and Asia's growing middle class. Foreign-arrival figures for Cambodia and Laos have more than doubled in the last five years alone, while Vietnam has seen an almost 80 percent increase. The major temples of Angkor swarm with huge, herded tour groups,

07/10

PLUS

Ta Prohm is one of Angkor's most popular temples; visit at sunrise, when most tourists are corralled at Angkor Wat.

while the fantastical limestone islands of Halong Bay are fouled by garbage discarded by ships, floating villages, and mainland towns. It's not just the landscapes that have been diminished by tourism: The Buddhist monks of Luang Prabang must wade through a phalanx of flash-wielding photographers during their morning alms-walk, while ethnic Thai don imitation hill tribe costumes to hawk souvenirs in Chiang Mai's Night Market. The biggest cultural abomination, however, may be the human zoos of exotic Long-neck Karen women, their necks encased in heavy brass rings. They are viewable on exhibit—for a fee—as far afield as Pattaya, a honky-tonk Thai beach resort more than 400 miles from their historic Burmese homeland.

FOREIGN ARRIVALS TO CAMBODIA AND LAOS HAVE MORE THAN DOUBLED IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS

But don't strike locales like Angkor and Luang Prabang from your bucket list yet. A number of resources, strategies, and undiscovered side trips now allow savvy travelers to enjoy these overcapacity places in an authentic manner, often with a responsible environmental or community-based approach.

"There are options for a better experience out there," says Mason Florence, a former Lonely Planet guidebook author and current executive director of the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office (MTCO). "People who come and have the five-star, sequestered-resort version go home and say it was lovely, but deep inside they feel they've missed something." To help travelers find more authenticity, MTCO publishes *The Guide to Responsible Tourism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam,* which details sustainable-tourism activities ranging from watching wild elephants gather at a salt lick north of Vientiane, Laos, to negotiating a mock minefield outside Siem Reap (much of the information can also be found at exploremekong.org). In a similar initiative, the World Bank's International Finance Corporation in 2007 began funding "Stay Another Day," a trio of free booklets promoting non-governmental organizations and socially conscious businesses in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. The tourist-friendly information is also available online at stay-another-day.org.

Visitors aren't overwhelming only Asian destinations, of course: Attractions from New Zealand's Milford Track to Peru's Machu Picchu wrestle with mass tourism. But in developing countries in Southeast Asia, there is little official interest in managing numbers at popular sights, no matter the environmental or social costs. In Siem Reap, for instance, that means a steady parade of package tours. "They're done in a very lazy fashion," says Andrew Booth, the Oxford-educated president of About Asia, which handles custom multi-day tours. "For a certain tourist, it's fine. But for the thinking man, it's got to be more interesting." To stay ahead of the pack, Booth pays his guides to spend a half-day every week researching new sights, routes, and seasonal specialties, all in the quest for "spice notes" to enliven About Asia itineraries. A typical day might include fishing on Tonle Sap, the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia, stopping at a local restaurant for a bowl of cobra soup, or walking the deserted, jungle-clad walls of Angkor Thom.

I GET AN IDEA OF THE 156-SQUARE-mile Angkor park's rich scope on a daylong mountain-bike tour with Terre Cambodge, an active-adventure company operated by Laurent Holdener, a Swiss-Khmer who's lived in Siem Reap for a decade. "A bicycle is faster than trekking but slower than a van," Holdener observes. "A motorcycle is too fast. On a bicycle, you can look around. You can also have easy contact with the locals. They're always very surprised to see some *barang* [foreigner] riding a bike."

One of Holdener's favorite routes begins at Banteay Samre, a large, lightly visited temple that was built in the middle of the twelfth century and has many of the same architectural flourishes as Angkor Wat. After sharing the ruins with ten other early-morning visitors, I pedal with guide Tonath Luem, a former Buddhist monk ("So many

MILESTONES

On the Map and Off the Charts

Few countries' popular images are as linked to a historic treasure as Cambodia's is to Angkor. Here, a look at its meteoric rise from ruin to rock star.

A.D. 802
KING JAYAVARMAN II founds Angkor. It serves as the capital of the Khmer empire for four centuries, until invaders from present-day Thailand drive the population from the city.

1860
FRENCH NATURALIST Henri Mouhot's rhapsodic firsthand account of the ruins brings the world's attention to Angkor. He describes one temple as "erected by some ancient Michael Angelo."

1907
FIRST TOURIST WAVE arrives after the French open the Angkor Conservation Authority.

1972–79
CIVIL WAR leaves the temples looted but largely unscathed as more than one and a half million die under the murderous Khmer Rouge regime.

1993
U.N.-SPONSORED ELECTIONS usher in a lasting peace the year after Angkor is declared a World Heritage Site. Angkor becomes vital to a government embracing tourism—and hoping to build national pride by promoting Khmer history. Siem Reap sees 7,650 foreign arrivals.

1994
ECSTATIC PIZZA OPENS to sate hungry United Nations employees hankering for a greasy slice. Siem Reap has seven hotels.

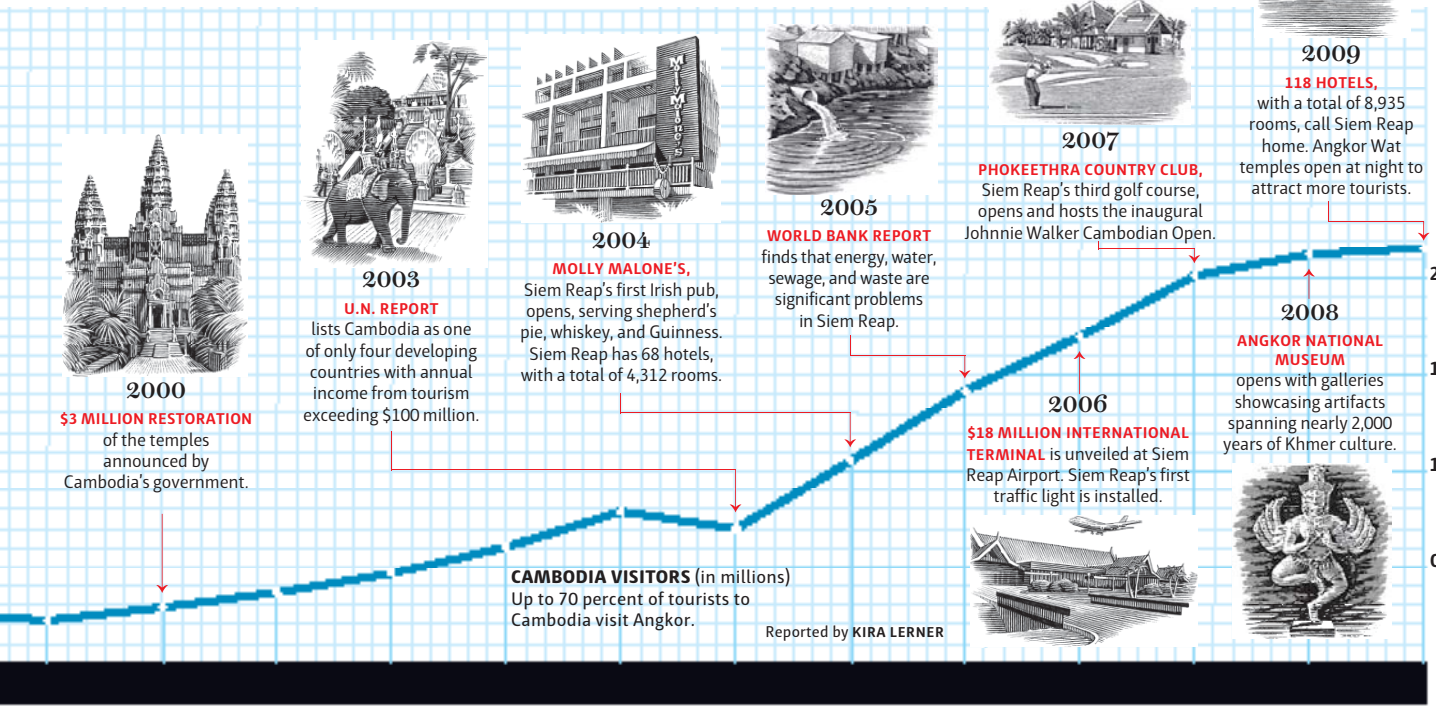
rules—no smoking, no drinking!"), along back roads toward Banteay Srey, a fairy-tale-pink sandstone temple renowned for its delicate carvings. The level, 30-mile ride unfurls with a succession of wondrous, relatively empty Khmer masterpieces, punctuated with village stops to taste rice whiskey and palm-sugar sweets. Just before sunset, Luem and I coast down a local trail to one final ruin, Ta Nei, a small jewel built by Angkor's greatest king, Jayavarman VII. The temple is about a one-mile walk from the nearest parking lot, and it is utterly deserted—no rangers, no touts, not even any children. "Most tourists don't like to walk to see this ruin," Luem says. "It's too far."

Ta Nei's beguiling solitude reminds me of my first evening at Angkor almost a decade ago, when I watched the sun set from hilltop Phnom Bakheng temple with a pair of monks and a handful of other visitors. While those days have vanished—in the high season, hundreds of tourists now clog the summit at sunset—it's heartening to know that there are other, sweeter spots. "I've dreamed of seeing Angkor Wat since I was a child," says Joe Mazzullo, who traveled to Siem Reap from Honolulu with his wife, Vanessa. "It has lost some of its luster because of how crowded and commercialized it is, but the park is so huge that if you go looking, you can still find wonderful nooks and crannies."

"IF YOU GO LOOKING, YOU CAN STILL FIND WONDERFUL NOOKS AND CRANNIES" AT ANGKOR WAT

To fully appreciate Cambodia's culture, I need to experience its great inland lake, Tonle Sap, one of the hydrological wonders of the world. Barely three feet deep in the late-spring dry season, it can rise more than 30 feet during the summer rains, when its surface area quintuples to 4,500 square miles. The settlement most visitors see is Siem Reap's grungy port, Chong Kneas, just a 15-minute drive south of Angkor. Better to travel an hour across the lake to Prek Toal or Prek Kanteil, two less-touristed communities bracketing a protected flooded forest that provides crucial habitat for a vast array of waterbirds, including such rare species as greater adjutants and spot-billed pelicans.

I board a longtail boat with Aing "Chai" Sopharit, ecotourism manager for Osmose, a local non-profit that



Illustrations by Bruce Hutchison

Few travelers visit Tonle Sap's floating villages, let alone stay in one.

WE TOAST THE SUNSET WITH RICE WINE AS ORIENTAL DARTERS WING TOWARD THE FOREST

receives high marks from MTCO for its community-development programs. We visit Prek Toal, a sprawling waterborne town of some 900 families, with floating shops, churches, and gas stations. There's even a very basic hotel with rooms perched on concrete pilings.

But for deeper cultural immersion, I opt for the home-stay program Osmose runs in Prek Kanteil, a smaller floating village of 170 families approximately ten miles to the east. After a lunch of deep-fried snakehead and walking catfish in Prek Kanteil, Chai and I board a pirogue paddled by a local woman and glide up a narrow channel lined with floating homes and crocodile pens, a one-room primary school, and—because Cambodians don't leave their sing-along obsession on dry land—a karaoke bar.

My home-stay raft is a simple affair: My bed is a mattress draped with a mosquito net on the planked deck of a family's barge. A plastic bucket and scoop pass for the shower, while the toilet is a screened-off hole in the far corner of the deck (I'm happy to learn that there's a proper commode in Osmose's floating office here). We toast the sunset with rice wine on a platform atop Osmose's education center, as Oriental darters wing their way toward the forest. Night unfolds quickly, revealing a sky spangled with constellations.

IT IS EASY TO FALL FOR LUANG Prabang, a vibrant village with centuries-old Lao and French colonial buildings in a valley. Its enchanting qualities earned the old royal capital UNESCO World Heritage status in 1995 as "the best-preserved city in Southeast Asia," sparking a tourism boom that has resuscitated the economy and preserved the architectural heritage. But tourism has also brought troubling social and cultural upheaval: Farmers have been displaced for a new golf course, while gentrification has caused many local people to rent out their homes as guesthouses, restaurants, or galleries and to move out of the historic quarter on the small sliver of land between the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers.

In some neighborhoods, there are no longer enough residents to support the monasteries, says UNESCO consultant Francis Engelmann. "It could soon turn into a theme park or a cultural museum—an empty place with no soul, no spirit, no life," he adds. The daily morning alms ceremony, in which hundreds of saffron-robed Buddhist monks walk through the misty streets of the Old Town along the Mekong River, has turned into an undignified circus, with agencies selling spots along the route to tourists—most of whom are not Buddhist—so that they can dole out fruit and packets of rice.

"Would you find it nice if a Japanese tourist wanted to participate in Communion just for fun?" Engelmann asks. "It makes no sense. Just respect and admire the beauty of it from a distance."

I elect to escape the crowds and explore the surrounding mountains with Tiger Trail, a German-owned company recommended in the "Stay Another Day" booklet. The outfitter's "fair trek" program provides income for remote subsistence-farming communities of ethnic-minority Kamu and Hmong. Clients pay a $2 village-entrance fee, which is held in escrow by the provincial tourism office and used for big-ticket projects like village irrigation systems or bridges. Tiger Trail paid $5,000 into the fund last year, and local authorities now require all licensed tour operators to follow suit. It's a more equitable arrangement than the trekking operations I've encountered in Thailand, where highland villages reap few, if any, benefits.

On this two-day trip, I travel with Somekhid Bounpheng, a young Kamu guide who spent seven years as a monk in Luang Prabang's Wat Kili before disrobing in 2007. We follow a ten-mile bike ride with a quick dip in the terraced cascades of Tad Xe waterfall—the proverbial swimming hole—and then hike east through a teak plantation, taking care not to step on the bowling ball–size droppings of the elephants that are another homespun tourist attraction. It's an hour's walk to Ban Houayfai, a Kamu settlement of thatched-roof huts and about 400 people. Our host, Khamsai, a former village headman, rustles up a hearty meal of sticky rice, minced pork, and vegetable soup, all washed down with Beer Lao chilled in the water tank of his dorm-style guesthouse's washroom. There's no refrigeration here, but four families now have generators—as well as satellite dishes and TVs. And it is movie night in Ban Houayfai. I pay 100 kip (about 12 cents) and enter

TIPS AND TOOLS

KEEPING IT REAL

How to beat the crowds and have an authentic experience, whether you go it alone or with a guide or a group

Hiring a good guide or joining a small group can deepen your experience, but you can have a rewarding time on your own by following these suggestions:

- **Ask your hotel concierge** or manager if it's possible to visit the local community without being disruptive. Many hotels in developing countries support community projects and arrange visits for hotel guests who make donations.
- **Study the itineraries** of a couple of local tour operators and visit popular sites when they're not there.
- **Find a local coffee shop** or Internet café that caters to travelers and expats. Chat up other customers for advice on the best off-the-radar local spots and the optimal times to see them.
- **Buy a detailed local map.** It will help you plan your itinerary—and avoid getting lost.
- **Visit temples** and other sites known for their sunsets at sunrise (vice versa for sites known for their sunrises) to avoid the crowds.

*** IF YOU DO DECIDE TO GO WITH A GUIDE OR A GROUP:**

- **Ask your hotel concierge** or manager for guide or tour-company recommendations.
- **Ask international wildlife organizations** to direct you to reputable outfitters that visit their conservation projects.
- **Try to book multiday excursions** well in advance, and ask the tour company for testimonials. That way, you're less likely to decide it's not for you a day or two into the tour.

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a dirt-floor hut. Roughly 100 villagers are crammed into the dark, smoky interior, sitting on long wooden benches or sleeping on platforms against the split-bamboo walls. Judging from the actors' clothes and haircuts, the cheesy Thai police drama is at least 20 years old, yet no one in Ban Houayfai seems to mind; to them, the film looks like something from a shiny, wondrous future.

Back at Khamsai's guesthouse, I ask him about the changes tourism has brought. "It's better than working in the rice fields," he says. "There are guests nearly every night. With the money from the guesthouse, we build a shop." We are interrupted when Khamsai's herd of goats stampede through the dining area.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I journey three hours by boat up the Mekong from Luang Prabang to Ban Gnoyhai, another Kamu village. There's no guesthouse here, only the off-the-grid Kamu Lodge, a collection of 20 luxury tents with solar power (including solar-heated showers) and terraced rice paddies adjacent to the hamlet of 65 families. With the exception of the Lao general manager and my guide, Toua Son Sue Nou, an ethnic Hmong, the 20-person staff hail entirely from Ban Gnoyhai, whose inhabitants eke out a living growing tobacco and rice in the tumble of mountains.

The village itself has no electricity or cell phone service. Luang Prabang's hotels—with their swimming pools, Wi-Fi access, and luxury spas—might as well be on another planet. Here, the guest activities include such traditional rural skills as cast-net fishing, gold panning, rice farming, crossbow shooting, and hiking, since these mountain people are prodigious walkers.

Toua, who grew up in the highlands, proposes a two-hour climb to a summit with a panoramic view of the river valley. I counter with a three-mile walk on a level, shaded trail along the river's edge to Ban Houaykhae, a mixed community of ethnic Kamu and Hmong. We set out on a foggy morning and soon come upon several dozen Lao from another nearby river hamlet, Ban Khokpho. It is hardly a festive occasion: A young man from their village drowned in the Mekong the evening before, and his body has just been found in a fishnet downriver. The neighbors are preparing a riverside cremation—it is considered bad luck to bring the corpse back to Ban Khokpho.

Spiritual concerns aren't confined to Ban Khokpho. Just before we enter the Hmong village, Toua points out three large sticks in the dirt path: They are set in a Y shape and are topped with pebbles. It is a "soul calling," he explains, laid down by the village shaman to coax the soul of a sick person to return to its body.

"LUANG PRABANG COULD SOON TURN INTO A THEME PARK—AN EMPTY PLACE WITH NO SOUL"

Inside Ban Houaykae, the dogs seem too astounded at the sight of a foreigner to bark. We spot several huts girdled with wooden ornaments carved in the shape of knives—more of the shaman's handiwork. "The spirits are scared by this," says Toua. "They can't get into the house."

We find the hardworking shaman sitting on the veranda of his simple split-bamboo home, clad in traditional indigo-dyed Hmong clothing. At 76 and blind in one eye, Blia Tou has a preternaturally quiet bearing, the result of more than 30 years of treading in the netherworld of ghosts and lost souls. He warms to us when he learns that Toua is also Hmong. "I was chosen by the spirits to become a shaman. You cannot volunteer," he explains, as Toua translates. "You get very sick for a week. Doctors and medicine cannot help. A shaman must be called."

I ask Blia Tou what he remembers about the Vietnam War. Many Hmong were hired as mercenaries by the CIA and faced terrible persecution after the Communist victory in 1975. The shaman changes the subject, preferring to remember the war between the French and Lao rebels in the 1950s. "Some French get hurt and come to stay and die in my house," he relates. "We bury them in the ground. Later, the French come and take the bodies."

On the return trek, I wonder what possible remedies a shaman would prescribe for the souls of the dead French soldiers. Along the riverbank, I see plumes of blue-gray smoke rising in the still air: the young villager's cremation, attended by dozens of mourners from Ban Khokpho. We keep walking—this is too personal for outsiders.

Back at the Kamu Lodge, I find that my laptop's battery has died. What's the point of recharging? The online world of Twitter and Wall Street updates has no place in Ban Gnoyhai. Time here runs thick and viscous. Besides, it's not often that I get a chance to polish my crossbow skills. □

In Laos, just outside Luang Prabang, Tad Xe waterfall gives respite from the midday heat.

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- **Ask about the maximum tour group size:** Smaller is generally better.
- **Ask if the tour company** will be running the excursion. If it is simply a consolidator, move on.
- **Consider booking a custom tour.** You usually get what you pay for, and the additional cost is often offset by the enhanced experience.
- **Ask if your tour guide** is licensed or certified and comes from the local community. If you're planning a backcountry trek to visit a minority population, request a guide who is from that area or fluent in the dialect.
- **Ask how many** are in your trekking party and how often the villages receive visitors. Choose an operator who keeps visits infrequent and the group size small.

* NO MATTER WHAT:

- **Do your homework prior to departure.** Have at least a general idea of the must-sees by consulting guidebooks as well as message boards, including travelfish.org and Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree travel forum (lonelyplanet.com/thorntree). This will also help you to vet tour companies or design your own itinerary.
- **Consider a trip in the countryside by bicycle** or boat or on foot, which will increase your opportunities for interaction with the local people.
- **Slow down:** You'll see more by doing less. **—C. C.**

BEING THERE

Untried and True

From Borneo to Vietnam, six must-see Asian gems for travelers who prefer blazing their own trails to following the crowds

1 KAMPOT

Cambodia

With its faded French colonial buildings set along the banks of a broad, brackish river, this quiet coastal town seems a backwater lifted straight from a Conrad novel. Until the late nineteenth century, it was Cambodia's primary seaport; at the turn of the twentieth century, the French laid out a proper town. Today, Kampot's faded grandeur and unaffected ambience attract travelers looking for a semblance of old Indochine. The windswept ruins of Bokor, set atop the 3,000-foot escarpment that looms like a green wave above the town, are the chief diversion. **Where to stay:** The **Rikitikitavi** hotel and restaurant has comfortable, simply furnished rooms with all the mod cons, including free Wi-Fi (855-12-235102; doubles, $35, including breakfast). **When to go:** The weather's best from November through March. **How to go:** Buses take more than five hours to make the bruising 100-mile trip from Phnom Penh; splurge for a private taxi.

2 CON DAO

Vietnam

For centuries, the granite peaks of this gorgeous archipelago were a landmark for mariners plying the South China Sea (including Marco Polo). Its remoteness made it an ideal penal colony for French Indochina and, later, South Vietnam. That maximum-security status also prevented commercial development. Today, 80 percent of Con Dao's mountainous landmass is a national park. The surrounding waters are perfection, with hundreds of coral species, colorful reef fish, sea turtles, and even dugong, an endangered relative of the manatee. Because of Con Dao's historic importance (20,000 inmates died here between 1861 and 1975), authorities are intent on limiting development. **Where to stay:** Six Senses will debut a 51-villa property later this year; for now, stay at the modest, seaside **ATC** (84-64-830-666; doubles, $79). **When to go:** The weather is driest from November through February; dive season is March through September. **How to go:** Vietnam Air Services makes the 45-minute flight from Ho Chi Minh City six days a week.

3 LAKE INLE

Myanmar

At Myanmar's stunning Lake Inle, you'll see few foreigners these days. Dotted with floating gardens and teak temples, the lake is best explored by boat. Hire a canoe in Nyaung Shwe, the main town, and ask the boatman to skip the touristy cat-jumping monastery and silk-weaving shops and simply paddle around the stilt villages. Visit the outdoor markets, and watch the fishermen navigate the reedy waters, standing as they row, one leg wrapped around the rudder. For day hikes in the lush hills above Inle, hire a guide in town; to arrange longer treks, contact Yangon-based **Good News Travels** (95 1-37-50-50). **Where to stay:** The fanciest digs on the lake are the overwater bungalows at the **Inle Princess Resort** (95-81-29055; doubles, $160–$250). **When to go:** During the **Pagoda Festival,** when villagers from surrounding towns flock to the lake for rowing races and other events (Oct. 9–26, 2010). **How to go:** Heho, the gateway to Inle, is a one-hour flight from Yangon.

4 KUCHING

Borneo

If you're expecting Borneo to be the last surviving outpost of cannibals with blowpipes, think again. Sarawak's capital, Kuching, is one of the most elegant and tidy cities in Asia—like a Singapore without the neon signs and high-rises—and is a fusion of cultures in every way, combining several local tribes, Malay administration, Chinese business savvy, and charming British colonial architecture. Though few tourists travel here, there are a great many things to do: Visit the tribal village and the former homes and fortresses of the British colonialists; drive to the orangutan reserve or to an isolated beach; or take a river cruise through the mangroves. If visiting in July, join the party at the World Rainforest Music Festival. **Where to stay:** The **Hilton Kuching.** For outstanding views, ask for a river view on a high floor (60-82-248-200; doubles, $82–$119). **When to go:** Thanks to Kuching's location close to the equator, temperatures are in the 70s and 80s year-round. Expect rain daily between November and March. **How to go:** Malaysian Airlines and Air Asia fly here from Kuala Lumpur.

5 TANA TORAJA

Indonesia

A verdurous valley ringed by purple peaks on the island of Sulawesi, Tana Toraja rivals Bali in natural beauty and cultural traditions. But isolation—the nearest airport is an eight-hour drive away—and decades-long civil strife in central Sulawesi have kept it off the jet set's radar. Those who do come find distinctive indigenous architecture and thousands of cliffside and cave graves. Many travelers time their visit to the oddly sociable funeral season, which typically falls in late summer (Torajans wait to bury their dead until after the busy rice harvest). Funerals, elaborate productions that last for several days, are often open to outsiders. If you attend one, be sure to bring a gift—a sacrificial pig or buffalo or a pack of cigarettes will do. **Where to stay:** The **Toraja Heritage Hotel** has a large pool and comfortable rooms (62-423-21-192; doubles, $105–$175). **When to go:** July and August. **How to go:** Diane Embree of **Southeast Asia Tours** will arrange for a guide and driver to pick you up in Makassar, one of Sulawesi's main cities (818-717-0785).

6 KOH YAO NOI

Thailand

One of the best-kept secrets along Thailand's Andaman seaboard, Koh Yao Noi lacks sugar-white beaches, which has discouraged large-scale tourism; most of the 5,000 friendly Muslim inhabitants make a modest living as fishermen or rubber tappers. Aside from relaxing in hammocks or feasting on seafood, visitors cycle the island's ring road through rice paddies and rubber-tree plantations or hire longtail boats to explore scenic Phang-Nga Bay, including the pinnacle of Khao Tapu (the so-called James Bond Island, for its star turn in *The Man with the Golden Gun*) and the turquoise lagoon of Koh Hong. Don't expect much nightlife: This is the kind of place where men play checkers with bottle caps beneath beachfront casuarina trees, and the loudest sound is the muezzin's call to prayer. **Where to stay:** The 56-villa **Six Senses Hideaway** overlooks the bay (66-76-418-500; doubles, $650–$950). **When to go:** December through March is driest. **How to go:** Most ferries leave from Phuket's Ban Rong Pier; the crossing takes about an hour.

Reported by **CHRISTOPHER R. COX, DEBORAH DUNN,** and **COLIN HINSHELWOOD**

Map by Joyce Pendola

THE BACKSTORY

The Perils of Popularity

World Heritage status places sites in the global spotlight, but does little to protect them from the tourists that follow. KAREN ANGEL ***reports***

IN THE 38 YEARS SINCE UNESCO launched its World Heritage program to help preserve cultural and natural treasures, nearly 900 sites—including Pompeii, Machu Picchu, and Angkor Wat—have earned the distinction. But some conservation experts now say that the uncontrolled tourism development that follows World Heritage designation may do more harm than good for the very sites the program was meant to protect.

"The fame of being a World Heritage Site brings additional tourism, which can be a blessing or a curse, depending on how well it's managed," says Stephen Morris, chief of international affairs for the U.S. National Park Service, the American liaison to the World Heritage Committee. In Cambodia's Angkor Archaeological Park, for instance, the rapid rise of popularity has led to a host of problems. "The sprawl of hotels with their pools and whirlpools is sapping the region's local aquifer, causing Angkor's monuments to sink into the ground," says Jeff Morgan, executive director of the Global Heritage Fund, a nonprofit that works to save endangered cultural heritage sites in developing countries. Similarly, in Vietnam's Halong Bay, which two million tourists visit each year (up from about 200,000 in the mid-1990s), complaints abound of floating garbage being tossed from the many tourist boats that ply the waters. But the "major economic development projects and landfill activities" related to the growth in tourism are even bigger concerns, according to a 2009 UNESCO report.

While issues such as unchecked development and pollution have earned 31 sites a place on UNESCO's World Heritage in Danger list, Morris estimates that as many as 150 more sites "could be justified for inclusion on the list." Only two—Oman's Arabian Oryx Sanctuary and Germany's Dresden Elbe Valley—have ever lost World Heritage status for failing to uphold conservation standards.

Many conservationists fault the World Heritage Committee, a rotating group of representatives from 21 countries, for focusing more on adding new sites than on conserving existing ones. One drawback of hastily adding sites is that many lack an adequate tourism management plan—even though having one is a condition of inscription. "Usually, there are not detailed tourism or public-use plans, or anyone trained as a tourism specialist to make the needed links between the site management, the local communities, and the tourism industry," says Art Pedersen, who runs the World Heritage sustainable tourism program. A lack of manpower and money adds to the challenge: The program is overseen by UNESCO's World Heritage Centre in Paris, which has a budget of just $4 million and a full-time staff of 35—meaning the nearly 900 sites are left largely to their own devices when it comes to managing the burgeoning number of visitors.

THE WORLD HERITAGE CENTRE HAS A BUDGET OF JUST $4 MILLION AND A STAFF OF 35

Still, says John Stubbs, the World Monuments Fund's vice president for field projects, World Heritage status affords a certain degree of protection without which many sites would be in much worse shape. "Angkor would be a free-for-all," he says. "There would be condominiums overlooking the park and God knows what because it is a must-see destination." □

▲ Vietnam's Halong Bay draws some two million tourists a year.

Photograph by Tito Dupret/Patrimonium-mundi.org