

ROUGH GUIDES



THE ROUGH GUIDE to

First-Time Asia

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO





About this book

First-Time Asia is not a guidebook: it's a book to read before you go, a planning handbook, and has been divided into five main sections.

The **colour section** introduces Asia, with inspired ideas for what to see and do on your trip.

The **Big Adventure** includes all the information you need to plan your trip, from buying tickets, budgeting and packing to what to expect from life on the road.

Where to go includes profiles of the 21 most accessible countries in Asia, giving you a taste of what they hold in store, along with suggested highlights.

The **Directory** is crammed with useful addresses, websites and phone numbers for everything from tour operators and equipment suppliers to travel clinics.

The book concludes with all the **small print**, including details of how to send in updates and corrections, and a comprehensive **index**.

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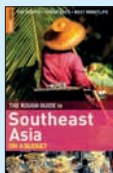
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The publishers and authors have done their best to ensure the accuracy and currency of all the information in *The Rough Guide to First-Time Asia*, however, they can accept no responsibility for any loss, injury, or inconvenience sustained by any traveller as a result of information or advice contained in the guide.

The **Rough Guide** to

First-Time Asia



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Introduction to

First-Time Asia

Every year, millions of visitors set off on their own Asian adventure. Some want to see for themselves a few of the world's greatest monuments – to stroll along the Great Wall of China or stand beside India's Taj Mahal. Others are drawn by the soaring mountains of the Himalayas, the white-sand beaches and kaleidoscopic coral reefs of Southeast Asia, or the chance to spot elephants, orangutans and even tigers in steamy jungles across the continent. But perhaps the greatest attraction is the sheer vitality of everyday life: you can watch Thai boxing in Bangkok and trance dances in Bali, learn yoga in Varanasi, drink rice whisky in Vientiane, eat dim sum in Shanghai and satay in Penang, bargain for mangosteens in Manila and silver in Hanoi.



Nearly all these things are **affordable**, even for low-budget travellers, because most of Asia is still enticingly inexpensive: Western money goes much further here than it does in Africa or South America. This has put Asia firmly at the heart of the backpackers' trail, and many cities and islands already boast a lively travellers' scene, attracting young adventurers from all over the world. Few travellers leave Asia without experiencing at least one of its fabled hot spots: the beaches of Goa, perhaps, the guesthouses of Kathmandu, or one of Thailand's notorious full-moon parties.

On the other hand, **Asian travel** can also be a shocking and sobering experience. It's hard to forget your first sight of a shantytown slum or

▲ Jungle trekking, Malaysia



your first encounter with an amputee begging for coins. Many first-timers are distressed by the dirt, the squalor, and the lingering smell of garbage and drains in some Asian cities. They get unnerved by the ever-present crowds and stressed out by never being able to mingle unnoticed among them. On top of which there's the oppressive heat to cope with, not to mention the unfamiliar food and often unfathomable local customs. There's no such thing as a hassle-free trip and, on reflection, few travellers would want that. It's often the dramas and surprises that make the best experiences, and we all learn from our mistakes.

Preparing for the big adventure

We've both made plenty of mistakes during our many years of travels in Asia, and this book is a distillation of what we've learnt. *First-Time Asia* is full of the advice we give to friends heading out to

Will it break the bank?

Once you've bought your ticket, you could get by in Asia on **\$110 or £70 a week**. That's for travel in the less expensive countries – such as India, Indonesia and Thailand – and for a trip that will see you spending a fair amount of time lazing on white-sand beaches and eating noodles for dinner at the local night market. Doesn't sound too bad does it? However, you will need to splash the cash a little more if you want to learn to dive, say (though that's half the price it is in the West), or go elephant trekking. A room with your own bathroom will cost more and you'll want to budget for a few nights out buying drinks as well. You'll need contingency funds too, for the unforeseen, and for shopping. The bottom line is to do a bit of **budgeting** before you go, for advice on which, see Chapter Four.

There are other ways to **stretch your funds** too: crafty planning can save on flights (see Chapter Two); it's cheaper to travel with a friend (Chapter One); and you can buy most of what you need inexpensively on the road (Chapter Six). And when all else fails you can sell your story to the press when you return (Chapter Fifteen).

Asia for the first time, and it's the book we both could have done with before setting off on our own first trips. Since then we've returned again and again, backpacking across India, China and Southeast Asia; living and working in the Himalayas, Thailand and Japan; and researching and writing guidebooks to Indonesia, Thailand and Tibet.



Camel driver, Rajasthan, India

And we still choose to go back to Asia for our holidays, attracted by the chaos and drama of daily lives that, even now, seem extraordinary to us, from the food, the landscapes and the climate, to the generosity and friendship of the people and the buzz we get from hanging out in cultures that are so entirely different from our own.

This book is intended to prepare you for your big adventure, whether it's a fortnight in Malaysia or twelve months across the continent. It is not a guidebook: it's a book to read before you go, a **planning handbook** to help you make decisions about what type of trip you'd like to make. And, because we can't pretend to have explored every single corner of Asia ourselves, we've also included tips, advice and stories from lots of other travellers.

Lhasa, Tibet



Not just beaches and temples

Though it sounds unlikely, several months of undiluted beachbumming and sightseeing can get a bit dull. A satisfying way to add a different dimension is to spend a few days in a place learning a local craft or skill. Many popular tourist towns offer short, accessible tourist-oriented **courses** and these are a great way of learning more about local life and traditions. You can, for example, study woodcarving in Bali, take taekwondo lessons in Seoul and try batik painting in Indonesia. Many travellers do Thai cookery workshops, while India and Nepal are famous centres for yoga and meditation. See p.46 for more ideas.



If you wish to get involved at a deeper level, you might consider doing **voluntary work** while you're in Asia, so that your time and skills, whatever they are, benefit some of the most needy people on the planet. In return, you'll gain valuable insight into lives that are probably far removed from your own. Some travellers prefer to sign up with a volunteer-placement organization before leaving home, where opportunities can range from a week on a turtle-conservation project in Malaysia to a month helping out in a Sri Lankan orphanage; others prefer to contact local charities direct on arrival. There's advice on how to find out more about volunteering on p.23.

The opening section, **The Big Adventure**, covers the key trip-planning stage in detail. Here you'll find all the nuts and bolts info on how to choose the right ticket and what gear to pack, plus advice on how long you can afford to stay away and the best time to do it. The second half of this section looks at life on the road, advising you on how to stay safe and healthy, cultural dos and don'ts and what to expect from Asian hotels and transport.

Then comes the hard part – deciding which parts of Asia you most want to visit and which to leave out. The second section of the book, **Where To Go**, looks at your options. We focus on the 21 most accessible and most visited countries of Asia, giving you an opinionated taste of what these destinations have in store for first-timers. Each **country profile** includes a



Street vendor, Vietnam

roundup of the major highlights and tourist activities, as well as a selection of personal recommendations and lesser-known gems, plus suggestions on related books and films and contact details for tourist offices and embassies. The most remote parts of the continent, north and west of Pakistan, rarely feature on first-timers' itineraries, so we haven't included them in this book. Burma (Myanmar) is also omitted in the hope that travellers will uphold the boycott on tourism requested by Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratically elected leader of the country. Finally, the **Directory** at the back of the book is packed with useful addresses, websites and phone numbers for further information on everything from discount flight agents and travel bookshops

to mosquito-net suppliers and conservation projects.

Even after you've digested *First-Time Asia*, we can't guarantee that you'll avoid every problem on the road, but hopefully you'll at least feel well prepared – and inspired. When you come back from your trip, be sure to send in your own anecdotes for inclusion in the next edition. We can promise you'll have plenty of great stories to tell.



Festival dress, Kerala, India

19

reasons to go

Asia embraces such a range of cultures, climates and landscapes that the very diversity that makes it so appealing can also make it seem a daunting place to visit. The trick is to decide on what kinds of experiences you hope to have, rather than setting up a whirlwind tour of the major sights. What follows is a selective taste of things you could do on your adventure.



01 Trek to the roof of the world It's worth every iota of energy, every agonising gasp for oxygen needed to trek close to Everest from Nepal (Page 283) or Tibet (Page 36) or to the major peaks of the Karakoram (Page 289).



02 Experience a local festival From Buddhist masked dancers in Bhutan (Page 222) to Mardi-Gras style pageants in the Philippines (Page 70), local festivals are often worth timing your visit for.



03 Paddle your own canoe Hire a kayak and set off to explore secret caves and deserted island beaches in Vietnam's Ha Long Bay (Page 336) and Thailand's Phang Nga Bay (Page 327).

04 Ride a tuk tuk Page 155 • These motorized rickshaws offer a high adrenalin route through the city streets. Sit back, hang on and enjoy the ride!



05 Get a job Page 86 • Try your luck as a Bollywood film extra in Mumbai, teach English in Korea, join a volunteer project in Sri Lanka: you don't have to be a beach bum for your entire trip.



06 Learn to dive Page 41 • Enter a whole new world in the tropical waters of the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Malaysia.



07 Party on the beach until sunrise Page 327 • The Thai island of Ko Pha Ngan hosts the world's biggest beach party every full-moon night, when thirty-thousand clubbers get sandy.



08 Hit the beach Turquoise waters, squeaky soft sand and a fringe of palm trees – you're spoilt for choice in Malaysia (Page 271), the Philippines (Page 293), Sri Lanka (Page 315) and Thailand (Page 324).



09 Become a surfer dude Page 44 • Asia has caught the surfing bug in a big way – watch, learn and get wave-riding in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and the Philippines for starters.

10 Taste the unspeakable Page 47 • Whether it's deep-fried locusts in Thailand, snake blood in Taiwan or dried squid in Korea, Asia's night markets are the perfect place to challenge your taste buds.



11 Do the classics India's Taj Mahal (Page 242), Angkor Wat in Cambodia (Page 229), and the Great Wall of China (Page 234) – you could see them all in a single trip.



12 Climb a volcano Don't tell your folks but Asia is one of the most seismically active parts of the planet and much of Asia was formed by volcanic eruptions. Climb Fuji (Japan; Page 258), Bromo (Indonesia; Page 251), or Pinatubo (Philippines; Page 38).



13 Sleep somewhere different Page 160 • With a dozen strangers in an Iban tribal longhouse in Malaysian Borneo; in a yurt on the Mongolian plains; or in a temple in South Korea.



14 Get armed and dangerous

Page 46 • Learn kung-fu with China's Shaolin monks, Thai boxing in Bangkok or the ancient art of Kalaripayattu in south India.

15 Survive an Asian metropolis The sheer exuberance of life in the major Asian cities has to be experienced to be believed. There's no buzz like it. Hong Kong (Page 238), Bangkok (Page 324), Dhaka (Page 215) and Delhi (Page 246).





16 Meet the ancestors Looking into the sad, knowing eyes of an orang-utan is an experience you won't forget in Indonesia (Page 253) and Malaysia (Page 273).

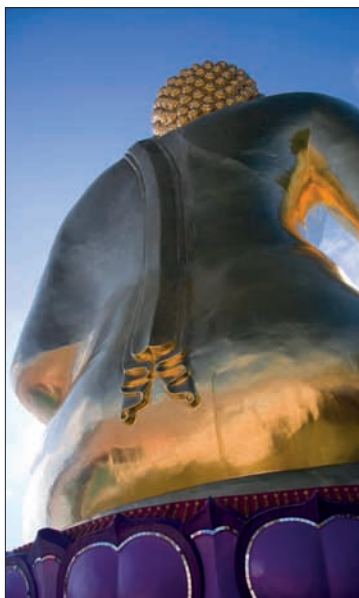


17 Find a new squeeze Page 47 • Go for an Indian head massage or a traditional Thai massage – or learn how to do it yourself.



18 Get a suit made Page 103 • Tailored to fit, and for a fraction of the cost back home. The best places to try include Hong Kong, Hoi An (Vietnam) and Bangkok.

19 Stand at the feet of the Buddha Some Buddha statues are so vast that you can only stare in awe, with neck craned as you gaze skywards. Sri Lanka (Page 314), Taiwan (Page 321) and Thailand (Page 324) all feature fine examples.



First-Time Asia

The Big Adventure

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Planning your trip

A vast and fascinatingly diverse continent stretches before you, so where to start? Before you come up with a shortlist of destinations you intend to visit it's worth deciding what **kind of trip** you are after as well as how long you intend to go for. Next you'll want to consider the highs and lows of **individual countries**, for which see "Where to go" in the second half of this book. Then there's the question of planning your **itinerary** – later in this chapter you'll find some suggestions for popular and creative journeys across Asia. In Chapter Five there's a roundup of pan-Asia travel literature and websites that should also be a good source of ideas. But first, consider the following:

- **The length of your trip** If money is the main consideration, check out Chapter Four to find out how far your budget will stretch.
- **The climate** Is it the right time of year to go trekking/white-water rafting/snorkelling and diving? Will it be raining all the time, or too hot to enjoy yourself? See Chapter Three for advice on this.
- **Are your proposed destinations safe at the moment?** Political turbulence and natural disasters won't enhance your trip, so consult Chapter Fourteen first.
- **Ticket options** Make some preliminary investigations into different ticket options, and check out relevant visa requirements, described in Chapter Two.
- **Think about the pace of your proposed trip** Are you going to be whizzing through places so fast that you won't have any real sense of where you are or what each country is like? Are you allowing yourself enough time and flexibility to add new places

to your itinerary or linger in spots that you like a lot? Cramming too many destinations into your schedule means that you'll see far too much of the worst bits of a country, namely its bus stations and airports.

- **Is your itinerary nicely balanced?** Will you get bored if you see nothing but beaches for the next few months? Might you start longing for some hill-walking after weeks of museums and temples?

A shared experience?

Now is also the time to think about who you want to go travelling with, or if indeed you want to share your trip with anyone at all. There are obvious pluses and minuses to both options. Travelling with one or more **companions** means you always have someone to chat to and plan things with; you can mull over your experiences together and share your enthusiasms and worries; and you may well feel braver about exploring and going out in the evening if you're with someone else. On a practical level, you will save money because double and triple rooms are better value and taxi expenses will be halved; and there'll always be someone to mind the bags while one of you looks for a hotel room or nips off to buy a mango in the market.

However, travel is a surprisingly **stressful** activity: the heat, the hassle and the sheer strangeness of things are bound to fray your nerves, and guess who's going to bear the brunt of your irritability? Expect to fall out every so often, and be prepared to split up during the trip – either for a few days because you've got different priorities, or for good because your differences seem insurmountable. Bearing this in mind, you and your prospective companions should take a long hard look at your friendship and try to imagine it under stress. Will one person be making all the plans and taking all the responsibilities, and will that annoy you? Do you have broadly the same expectations of the trip and share a similar attitude to mishaps and hassles? Does one of you have a lot more money, and will that cause tension?

If travel puts a strain on friendships, imagine what it does to **relationships**. A disconcerting number of romances crack during a long cross-Asia trip, but then perhaps they weren't meant to last anyway. If yours survives it, you will have been brought closer together and will have lots of great stories and photos to coo over for many years to come.

Going solo

Solo travel is a more extreme and intense experience. You have to face up to everything on your own, and find the motivation to move on, explore and be sociable all by yourself. There will be lonely times

for sure, and scary ones, and you'll probably get tired of eating out on your own every night. But you will also be a lot more open to your surroundings and you'll make more effort to chat to new people – as indeed they will to you (twosomes often put people off because they seem self-contained). Some people find that they're more alert and receptive on their own, and most single travellers write much more interesting emails and journals simply because they're desperate to blurt out all their experiences. And, of course, you have no one to answer to but yourself, which means you can change your plans at a moment's notice or idle away your days without feeling guilty.

Finding a travel companion

If you're nervous about going on your own, but can't find anyone to accompany you, all is not lost. Travel magazines, university noticeboards, newspaper personal columns and internet travel forums are full of advertisements from people looking for **travelling companions** (see Chapter Five for some leads). Most advertisers have specific itineraries in mind and will want to meet and discuss plans quite a few times; if you don't find an ad that fits your bill, why not place one yourself – bearing in mind the obvious safety precautions. Travelling with an unknown person can bring its share of unpleasant surprises, so you should definitely discuss ground rules before you go and perhaps even set off on a dummy trip – a weekend away, for example – before the big departure. But it can also be unexpectedly fun, and with any luck you'll have made a new friend by the trip's end.

Even if no one suitable turns up before you set off, you'll find it remarkably easy to hitch up with travel companions once you've arrived in Asia. The **backpackers' scene** is well established in major Asian towns, cities and beach resorts, and guesthouse noticeboards are often thick with requests for travelmates. Bangkok's Khao San Road, the Paharganj area of New Delhi, and Thamel in Kathmandu are all fruitful places to look.

Joining a tour

For some people, joining an **organized tour** is the most appealing introduction to Asia. This takes away a lot of the more daunting elements – like arranging local transport and accommodation yourself – and often means that you're accompanied by an expert whose in-depth knowledge of the country can really enhance your stay. Hundreds of tour operators offer trips to Asian destinations (see Directory, pp.343–344, for some recommendations) and the range of packages is phenomenal, from walking and cycling tours to ones that focus on culture, wildlife or cooking; a few specialize in budget travel, featuring homestay accommodation and

local transport, while some offer long, slow, overland journeys lasting six months, usually in specially converted trucks and with participants sharing the chores.

A popular compromise option is to start your trip as part of an organized tour for a few weeks, then branch off by yourself when you've gained more confidence and Asia know-how; many tour operators are used to this and offer tour-only prices so that you can arrange your own flights. This is also fairly common practice on budget-minded **overland tours** (such as those run by Dragoman and Explore) and gives you a good grounding as well as the chance to meet possible onward travel companions.

A sponsored holiday

A potentially interesting way of joining a tour and exploring a country while contributing something useful is to participate in a **fundraising activity holiday** in aid of a charity. Many of the major-league charities organize one or more of these events every year; recent examples have included a fortnight's cycle ride from Ho Chi Minh City to Angkor Wat, an eight-day horse ride across the Mongolian plains, a trek along the Great Wall of China, a climb up Malaysia's Mount Kinabalu followed by trekking through the jungles of Borneo, and a trek to Everest Base Camp in the Nepali Himalayas. For some expeditions, training in advance to get fit is part of the challenge, while for others the emphasis is more on having an energetic holiday and making some money for a good cause at the same time.

Each charity has a different way of organizing these events, but most ask for a minimum amount of **sponsorship**, typically between \$4000/£2500 and \$6500/£4000 for a fortnight's trip. It's up to you how to get this money, though organizers usually offer advice and sometimes even practical help. Obviously some of your money is used to cover your expenses – these are holidays after all, with reasonable board and lodging provided, as well as time set aside for sightseeing where relevant – but not everyone is happy at the percentage of the fee which goes in the charity box, so check first before registering. In addition, some people feel uncomfortable that their friends, families and colleagues are effectively financing the trip – hence the increasing emphasis on the pre-trip challenge of getting fit, which shows that you're working for your sponsorship.

If you have a favourite **charity**, contact them to see if they're planning any fundraising holidays, or browse online. The long-established organization Charity Challenge (☎020/8557 0000, @www.charitychallenge.com) runs many different fundraising adventure holiday programmes in Asia, most of them treks and mountain-bike rides, and has dozens of charities on its books, or you can add your own to the list. For information on working with a charity while you're in Asia, see the section on "Volunteer programmes", below.

Volunteer programmes and placements

Organizing a place on a **volunteer programme** is an increasingly popular way of anchoring a trip and giving it substance. Programmes can last anything from a week to six months, but the emphasis is always on participation in activities that contribute directly towards your host community; generally, you pay your expenses (sometimes minimal, sometimes at a premium) plus an administration fee, which can also vary considerably, as well as donating your time and skills. The big attraction is the opportunity to get involved in local life at a deeper and potentially more fulfilling level than you would as a backpacker or on a fundraising adventure holiday. Typical volunteer programmes include coral surveying in the Philippines, working in elephant conservation projects in Sri Lanka, and teaching English in Nepal. Volunteer projects vary widely and while some are very rewarding, others can feel unsatisfying, even futile. To help choose the best one, ask lots of questions before signing up and try to contact some former volunteers – a service offered by many of the most reputable outfits.

A variation on the volunteer programme is the **placement** or **internship**, whereby you get the chance to work in, say, a local newspaper, radio station, clinic, school, law firm, animal welfare centre or hotel. These placements are generally aimed at students looking for work or study experience. You pay for the privilege but the fee includes board and lodging. In some cases you will be benefiting the community, in others you'll just be learning more about the job – and the country.

A different kind of trip

When I packed in my job, I decided to go travelling for a while, but I wasn't interested in just bumming around and wanted to try and get under the surface of things instead. Indian Volunteers for Community Service (IVCS; @www.ivcs.org.uk) fitted the bill perfectly: a three-week visitors' programme at a small rural development project in northeastern India.

On our first day, we ten new volunteers were taken to town to buy traditional north Indian dress: *salwaar kameez* for the girls and pajama for the boys. This was to make us feel and act like we weren't just tourists, and to help us blend in better with the villagers of Amarpurkashi. Back at the village, we spent the next three weeks following an informal programme of yoga, Hindi lessons, cultural lectures and rural development workshops. We also worked in the kitchens, helped with the literacy campaign and gave regular English lessons at the village school.

I couldn't have asked for a better introduction to India. Though there was quite a big group of us Westerners, we all got involved in community life and experienced things tourists rarely get to see and do. By the end of the three weeks I felt acclimatized, confident and eager to do some exploring, so I spent the next five months making informal visits to development projects in other parts of India, using contacts I'd made at Amarpurkashi.

Juliet Acock

Agencies and organizers of established short-term volunteer projects, placements and internships are listed in the Directory on pp.344–347. Other useful **resources** include handbooks and directories such as **Volunteer for Development** (World Service Enquiry @www.wse.org.uk), which features general advice and a directory; and *Green Volunteers* (@www.greenvol.com), a directory of wildlife conservation projects and organizations worldwide.

You don't always need to set up your voluntary work in advance. Some **local charities** are happy to accept volunteers who walk in off the street and have no qualifications except a desire to help out for a few days; consult guidebooks and the web for details, or check the traveller-oriented collective Go MAD: Go Make a Difference @www.go-mad.org for leads.

At the other end of the spectrum, the big **international voluntary organizations** like VSO (@www.vso.org.uk), the Peace Corps (@www.peacecorps.gov) and Australian Volunteers International (@www.australianvolunteers.com) employ people for longer periods (generally for two years, but shorter placements are also available) and require specific qualifications; these jobs are always paid. For information on finding other kinds of paid work in Asia, see p.86.

Taking the kids

Many package tours are child-friendly and offer good deals, but it's also increasingly common for independent travellers, including single parents, to take their kids to Asia. **Children** are considered a huge blessing in most parts of Asia and yours will be treated accordingly. Outside the main resorts you're unlikely to find child-oriented entertainments, but there's usually so much going on that this shouldn't be an insurmountable drawback. And there's always the beach. The chief worry is how to keep your child healthy, but if you follow the advice given in Chapter Twelve, there's every chance that the whole family will have a hassle-free trip. As with adult travellers, certain countries or regions make for a smoother initiation into Asia than others – notably Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan – while China, India, Nepal and Pakistan may be better tackled after some acclimatization. Most of Southeast Asia falls somewhere in between.

Where to start?

You probably won't have much trouble deciding where to start your trip: there'll either be an obvious geographical option, or your travel agent will persuade you with an offer too tempting to ignore.

For Europeans, the usual **gateway cities** are Kathmandu, Delhi or Bangkok. These are the nearest entry points to Asia and generally the cheapest places to fly to, though low-cost carrier Air Asia (@www.air-asia.com) has now made Kuala Lumpur an enticing alternative. Australians usually begin somewhere in Indonesia, or in Singapore. Flying to Asia from America is a more long-winded process as you're literally travelling to the other side of the planet. From the East Coast, it's faster and nearly always cheaper to go via London, Amsterdam or Frankfurt, and then on to Kathmandu, Delhi or Bangkok. If you're starting from the West Coast, the cheapest routes will probably be to Seoul, Taipei, Tokyo, Hong Kong or Singapore.

Saving money should not be the only consideration, though, and you'd be wise to think about the stress factor of your first days and nights in Asia:

- **Start yourself off gently** Many travellers find the poverty, chaos and crowds of India, for example, a very tough introduction to Asia, so you might want to begin your cross-Asia trip somewhere calmer, like Malaysia or Bali.
- **Fly in somewhere other than the big, stressful capital city** You can fly from Europe directly to Chiang Mai in north Thailand, for example, which means that by the time you've worked your way down to Bangkok (or across to Vientiane) you'll exude the confidence of an old Asia hand. Or you could make use of the burgeoning number of budget airlines operating within Asia and buy a Los Angeles–Singapore flight, say, making an immediate connection to Cambodia's Siem Reap, perhaps, or to the beaches of Krabi in south Thailand. See Chapter Two for information on the different types of air tickets available.
- **Plan an easy schedule for the first week** See Chapter Seven for more advice.

Across Asia by air

Most people choose to do their cross-Asia trip **by air**, simply because it's faster and easier than going overland. Travel agents sort out all the details for you and everything is booked in advance, which is reassuring for anxious relatives and one less headache for you. Advice on buying the best plane ticket for your trip is given in Chapter Two.

The best approach is to work out your **ideal route** before grilling the travel agent. But once you've got your core must-sees, be prepared to be flexible about the in-between bits, bearing in mind that some routes are a lot cheaper than others. If possible, leave some extra free

Fear of flying

Not everyone relishes the idea of travelling to the other side of the world in a pressurized metal box. **Fear of flying** is a relatively common anxiety – apparently seriously affecting one in six adults – making overland travel a necessity rather than a choice for many people.

Though getting to Asia by land and sea can be a very enjoyable experience (see p.27), there are a number of courses and other **resources** to help those who would like to combat their dread of air travel. The self-help website www.anxieties.com has a comprehensive section on fear of flying, with advice, practical step-by-step programmes and plenty of comparative statistics to impress on you how safe air travel actually is.

Several airlines, including British Airways and Virgin Atlantic, run regular **therapy workshops** which aim to help you deal with your fear by taking you through a simulated flight – some even culminate in a short real flight. In the UK, prices are about £200 for a one-day course and there's a directory of them on www.airraid.com. For workshops and self-help courses in the US, see the US section of www.airraid.com. In Australia, Qantas-staffed weekend courses are run by Fearless Flyers (☎02/9522 8455, www.fearlessflyers.com.au; Aus\$900).

The Qantas team has produced a **book**, *The Fearless Flier's Handbook* by Debbie Seaman; other books on the subject include *The Easy Way to Enjoy Flying* by Allen Carr; *Flying Without Fear* by Keith Godfrey; and *Ask the Pilot* by Patrick Smith.

For advice on how to enjoy your flight, see Chapter Seven.

time at strategic intervals so you can be spontaneous and follow up other travellers' recommendations once you're on the ground.

Before making any firm decisions about your ticket, check out the section on **overland routes** within Asia beginning on p.27. There are all sorts of intriguing bus, train and ferry routes between countries in Asia, and this can save you a lot of money on your air ticket, as well as enhancing your adventure. It's also a greener way to travel.

Round-the-world classic: UK–India–Nepal–Thailand–Malaysia–Indonesia–(Australia)–UK

This is a **classic first-time Asia itinerary** for anyone making their way there from Europe, giving you the run of the best of South and Southeast Asia with the added option of rounding off your trip in Australia. The route can be done on a round-the-world ticket, a multi-stop ticket or even on an open-jaw return – see Chapter Two for details on which ticket would be most suitable for you. For Australians, the same route applies, but in reverse, with the option of extending to Europe if you want.

The first port of call on many round-the-world trips is **Delhi**, chiefly because it's only ten hours' flying time from London. Although the Indian capital can be a stressful place for first-timers, it is well positioned for trips to Rajasthan and the Himalayas. But if you're going to head south to the beaches of Goa or Kerala, get an international flight to

Mumbai or Bangalore instead. Kolkata is a more unusual alternative, but a useful one as you can get cheap routeings to Bangkok via Dhaka in Bangladesh. From any point in India you have the choice of flying or overlanding to Kathmandu (see p.29), but to continue to Bangkok you'll have to fly as it's currently impossible to cross Burma overland.

If you decide to leave out the Indian subcontinent altogether, your trip will begin in **Bangkok**. From there, you have a choice of flying in short hops through Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, or making the long trek south overland. You may also want to factor in enough time to explore Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam from Thailand first, either overland or by local airlines. Travelling from Bangkok to Bali by bus, train and boat will save you heaps of money, but is obviously a lot more time-consuming. If you want to stop off for a while in all four countries en route then allow yourself at least two to three months for this part of the trip. There's a lot of ground to cover – Sumatra, for example, is the fourth largest island in the world – and the whole adventure becomes a real slog if you try to cram it all into three weeks.

In fact, the most popular route **south from Bangkok** is a combination of flying and overlanding. You can either weave a couple of flights into your round-the-world ticket before you go (for example, between Malaysia and Sumatra, and between Java and Bali), or buy flights in Asia as and when you get tired of long bus journeys. Bangkok is a good centre for cheap flights (visit @www.statravel.co.th for a list of sample fares), there's a growing number of budget Southeast Asian airlines (@www.airasia.com, @www.jetstarasia.com, @www.berjaya-air.com, @www.fireflyz.com, @bangkokair.com), and internal flights within Indonesia are both inexpensive and extensive. Long-distance overnight trains and buses cover the Thai–Malaysian–Singapore peninsula, and you can easily island-hop all the way from south Thailand and Malaysia to Bali and even on to Timor-Leste if you have the time.

Overland routes into Asia from Europe and Australia

For some travellers, the process of getting to Asia is part of the whole adventure, and choosing to go **overland** will vastly reduce your carbon footprint. A single flight from London to Beijing for example adds 0.72 tonnes of CO₂ per passenger; doing it by rail adds just 0.23 tonnes. However, time is a major factor here, and the expense may be off-putting too: though trains, buses and boats are generally cheaper than flights, you will have spent a fair bit on accommodation and food before you even arrive in Asia.

Delhi to London on a motorbike

After six months exploring India on an elderly Enfield Bullet, bought in Delhi for £600, I thought the bike would make a good souvenir. Shipping it was an option, but somehow riding the 10,000-odd miles home across Asia seemed a lot more interesting...

My route was a fairly standard one, taking me through Pakistan (with a side-trip up the Karakoram Highway into the northern hills), and then on to Iran and Turkey. Over the next five months, I rode through some of the most stunning and least-touristed areas of Asia, beneath soaring mountains, through barren deserts and across fertile plains. All the way along, people were exceptionally hospitable – there was always someone around to help me decipher squiggly road signs, direct me to a mechanic or, frequently, invite me home to stay with the family.

The gradual transition from East to West was fascinating: the culture, climate and terrain changed imperceptibly day by day. On top of that, there was something immensely satisfying about tracing a line on the map across two continents and actually following it on the ground.

Nicki McCormick

travel back home with your own wheels, this option entails even more paperwork; the bureaucracy involved in riding a motorbike back from India, for example, is so overwhelming that some travellers give up before they even get started.

The Trans-Siberian Railway: by train to China

The **Trans-Siberian Railway** is *the* classic overland route into Asia. Beginning in Moscow it leads you on a slow transition from Europe to Asia, via the endless Siberian wastes and Russia's vast Lake Baikal. It's a fabulous chance to watch and absorb the unfolding of lives and landscapes

The overland **routes** listed below are just a handful of the possible options. Though we've described them as routes **into** Asia, they're quite feasible when done in reverse. It's almost, but not quite, possible to travel all the way from Australia to Britain (and back) without resorting to an aeroplane. The only hiatus comes when you need to cross the sea between northern Australia and Timor-Leste. Unless you cadge a ride on a yacht or a cargo boat, you'll have to get an Airnorth flight (@www.airnorth.com.au) from Darwin to Dili in Timor-Leste, after which you can island-hop all the way to Singapore. In reality, most Australians choose the easy option and fly straight into Bali, beginning their journeys from there.

Once in Asia you have the option of continuing your travels by road, rail and river (see "Overland routes within Asia", p.30), or you can buy a series of air tickets as you go.

Some people choose to travel overland to Asia under their own steam, either **in a car or on a motorbike**, typically along the route blazed by the hippie travellers of the 1960s and 70s. Though it is also possible to buy a vehicle in Asia and

between continents and a great way to acclimatize yourself to the rhythm of travel. However, it's nowhere near as cheap as flying one-way to Beijing, and you need to plan your paperwork quite carefully.

Each of the three trans-Russia trains begin in Moscow and travel east to Irkutsk, beyond which the line divides into three: the **Trans-Mongolian** route branches off to Beijing via Ulaanbaatar, the **Trans-Manchurian** route also goes to Beijing, but via Harbin, while the **Trans-Siberian** proper goes to Vladivostok via Khabarovsk. Taking the Trans-Mongolian route from Moscow to Beijing means spending six days on the train, while the Trans-Manchurian route from Moscow to Beijing takes seven days. If you are patient, have lots of time and have paid meticulous attention to visa requirements, you can then continue by train from Beijing to Hanoi in **Vietnam** (2 days; see @www.seat61.com/China.htm). If you choose the Trans-Siberian route from Moscow you'll end up in Vladivostok (7 days), from where there are more or less weekly ferries to Fushiki in **Japan** (@www.bisintour.com; 39hr) and to Sokcho in **South Korea** with Dong Chun Ferry (@english.visitkorea.or.kr; 48hr).

Standard Trans-Siberian **tickets** for any of the three routes are direct and do not permit stops or side-trips; if you want to dally en route you'll need to go through a specialist tour operator, who can also arrange all the visas and other paperwork. The main routes are very popular so booking ahead is essential, even for non-stop services: fares booked through Real Russia (@realrussia.co.uk) start at \$620/£380 for non-stop journeys from Moscow to either Beijing or Vladivostok. A rail ticket from London to Moscow adds another \$490/£300. Sundowners travel agency offer budget Trans-Siberia packages for 18- to 35-year-olds on their Vodka Train tour (@www.vodkatrain.com; from \$1300/£795).

For a full rundown of everything you need to know about visas, life on the train and **ideas** for stopoffs, see the *Trans-Siberian Handbook*, published by Trailblazer, and the exceptionally detailed The Man in Seat Sixty-One website at @www.seat61.com/Trans-Siberian.htm.

The hippie trail: from Europe to Kathmandu via Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and India

In the flower-power days of the 1960s and 70s, the most popular route for adventurous, spiritually curious, budget travellers was to meander slowly **overland from Istanbul to Kathmandu**, taking in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India along the way. The route came to be known as the hippie trail and, almost a half a century later, it's still a fascinating way of travelling between Europe and Asia. These days, international politics permitting, the most common way to do this route is by car or motorbike, though it's also possible by public transport or with an organized tour.

With your own vehicle, if you put your foot down and ignore the temptations of the countries en route, you can reach Delhi from London in 21 days. However, doing it this way obviously involves some serious preparation, both for yourself and your vehicle. The **paperwork** is the biggest headache – visas need to be sorted out well in advance of your departure date, especially for Iran, and you will also need a special document for your vehicle known as a **carnet de passage**. Bikers should check out Trailblazer's *The Adventure Motorcycling Handbook*, which contains full details of all these requirements, as do the forums at www.horizonsunlimited.com, which are also relevant to car-drivers and have links to many travellers' blogs and other useful resources. For an account of biking through Asia, see www.chrison2wheels.com and its author's e-book, **Southeast Asia on 2 Wheels**.

Some **tour operators** (such as Dragoman and Exodus; see Directory, p.343) organize group overland trips along these routes in converted lorries. The trips take from four to thirty weeks, the age range is generally 18 to 40, and the all-inclusive cost is quite reasonable. If you're nervous about setting off for Asia on your own, then this could be a good way to start.

Overland routes within Asia

Before fixing your ticket routeing, think about spicing up your flight itinerary with some **overland routes** in between. It's a great feeling to watch from a train window as one country slowly metamorphoses into



▲ Travelling overland leaves a smaller carbon footprint

Long-distance cycling

Three of the world's classic cycle routes are in Asia, all of them mountain routes and all of them challenging: **Lhasa–Kathmandu**, from Tibet to Nepal; the **Karakoram Highway**, between China and Pakistan; and **Leh–Manali** in the Indian Himalayas. If you time it right, to get the most favourable weather and road conditions, this is an unbeatable way to experience these regions. Not only do you appreciate the landscape a lot more when you're pedalling every contour and reacting to every slight change in weather and altitude, but you're also off the beaten track a lot of time, stopping for food, water or lodging in villages you'd otherwise zip past. The Trailblazer **guidebook** *Himalaya by Bicycle* (@www.pocketsprocket.com) describes all three routes in great detail, and other useful Trailblazer cycling guides include *Adventure Cycle-Touring Handbook* (@www.adventurecycle-touringhandbook.com), which features routes, practical advice and first-hand adventure-cycling tales for Asia and the rest of the world; and *Tibet Overland* for routes through and between Tibet, China and Nepal.

Southeast Asia is a less extreme region for long-distance cycling: the website Biking Southeast Asia with Mr Pumpy (@www.mrpumpy.net) covers cycle trips across Vietnam, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia and India and has a long list of Asian-cycling links. Another good resource is Bike Sutra (@www.bikesutra.com/asia_cycling.html), which has many links to trip reports about cycling in Asia

If you want a bit of back-up en route, several tour-operators run **cycle-tours** along some of the best Asian routes: established companies include SpiceRoads (@www.spiceroads.com) and Red Spokes (@www.redspokes.com).

another – far more satisfying than whizzing over international borders at thirty thousand feet – and in nearly every case it will be a lot cheaper than flying. It's a lot more environmentally friendly and sometimes also quicker and more convenient than backtracking to the airport in the capital city. Overlanding under your own steam, especially by bicycle can also be an exhilarating way to travel; see box above for more.

Having the right **paperwork** is essential for overland routes, as most countries demand that you specify the exact land border when applying – see Chapter Two for more advice on this, and be sure to check out the viability of your proposed overland route before making any firm flight bookings.

You'll find a detailed list of the current designated **border crossings** in Asia on pp.32–33, and there's more detail in the individual country profiles on pp.215–340.

Southeast Asia: Thailand–Malaysia–Singapore–Indonesia

By far the most popular overland route within Asia is the trip down **from Thailand into Malaysia**. Having lingered on the coasts and islands of southern Thailand (Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan, Ko Phi Phi and Ko Lipe to name just a few), you can cross into Malaysia quite effortlessly by bus, minibus or ferry. Train travel via Hat Yai is also possible, but

Border crossings and international ferries

All the **border crossings** listed below are open to foreign travellers and, except where stated, are currently accessible from both sides. Burma and Sri Lanka are currently the only two countries that are inaccessible to overlanders.

Indian subcontinent

Pakistan–China By bus along the Karakoram Highway from Sost (Pakistan) to Tashkurgan (China).

India–Pakistan Bus or train from Amritsar to Lahore via Attari and Wagha.

India–China No overland crossing allowed.

India–Bangladesh From Kolkata to Dhaka (via Haridaspur and Benapole) to Dhaka by train and bus; from Shillong via Dawki/Tarnabil to Sylhet by bus. Also, from West Bengal: between Burimari and Patgram; Balurghat and Hilli; and Lalgola and Godagari; plus from Agartala in Tripura to Akhaura.

India–Sri Lanka Owing to the unrest in Sri Lanka, the ferry service between the two countries is suspended indefinitely.

India–Nepal Several crossings convenient for foreigners, including: by bus from Delhi, Varanasi or Gorakhpur (via Sonauli and Bhairawa) to Mahendra Nagar, Pokhara or Kathmandu; by bus from Bodh Gaya, Kolkata or Patna (via Raxaul and Birganj) to Pokhara or Kathmandu; and by bus and/or train from Siliguri, Darjeeling or Kolkata to Kakarbitta. Other borders crossings into western Nepal at Banbassa, Dhangadhi and Nepalganj.

Bhutan–India By road from Thimpu via Phuntsoling to Siliguri or Darjeeling; and by road via Samdrup Jongkhar to Assam district (this route is not permissible in reverse).

Nepal–China (Tibet) Currently not allowed for independent travellers on public transport (though it is permitted in the other direction). However, foreigners who have booked inclusive tours of Lhasa (these can be arranged in Kathmandu) are allowed to cross here; the tour companies organize the paperwork.

Southeast Asia

Thailand–Malaysia and Singapore Because of ongoing separatist violence in far southern Thailand the safest overland routes depart from Satun province: by minibus to Kangar, by ferry to Kuala Perlis or Langkawi and by boat from Ko Lipe to Langkawi. The direct trains from Bangkok to Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore travel via Hat Yai, in Thailand's troubled far south, so check government travel advisories first.

Malaysia–Singapore By bus, train or ferry.

Malaysia and Singapore–Indonesia By ferry or speedboat from Penang to Medan (Sumatra); from Melaka to Dumai (Sumatra); from Johor Bahru or Singapore to Pulau Batam and Pulau Bintan (Riau archipelago). By bus from Kuching (Sarawak) via Entikong to Pontianak (Kalimantan). By ferry from Tawau (Sabah) to Pulau Tarakan (Kalimantan).

Malaysia–The Philippines By ferry from Sandakan (Sabah) to Zamboanga (Mindanao).

Indonesia (West Timor)–Timor–Leste By bus from Kupang to Dili via Batugede. By road into Oecussi via Oesilo.

Indochina

Thailand–Laos By bus or train from Nong Khai to Vientiane; by bus from Mukdahan to Savannakhet; by ferry across and along the Mekong River from Chiang Khong (via Houayxai) to Louang Phabang; by bus from Chong Mek (via Ban Mai Sing Amphon) to Pakxe; from Nakhon Phanom (via Thakhek) to Vientiane.

Thailand–Cambodia By bus and boat or share-taxi from Trat to Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh (via Ban Hat Lek and Koh Kong). By bus and train from Aranyaprathet to Sisophon and Siem Reap (via Poipet). By bus from Surin (via Kap Choeng/O'Smach) to Anlong Veng. Via Sa Ngam near Si Saket province to Choam. By chartered minibus from Pong Nam Ron to Ban Laem or Phsa Prom for Pailin.

Cambodia–Laos By boat and bus from Stung Treng to Don Khong (Si Phan Don) and Pakxe (via Voeng Kham).

Laos–Vietnam By bus from Savannakhet and Xepon to Hué or Hanoi, via Lao Bao and Dong Ha. By bus from Lak Xao to Vinh, (via Kaew Nua and Cau Treo). Via Ban Nong Het to Vinh; via Na Maew to Nam Xoi; via Bo Y to Kon Tum; and via Tay Trang to Dien Bien Phu.

Vietnam–Cambodia By bus and share-taxi from Ho Chi Minh City to Phnom Penh (via Moc Bai and Bavet). By taxi, boat and bus from Chau Doc and the Mekong Delta to Phnom Penh (via K'am Samnar); and from the Mekong Delta and Phu Quoc island to Kampot and Kep (via Phnom Den and Prek Chak). From Pleiku to Ban Lung (via Le Tanh and O'Yadaw).

Vietnam–China By bus or rail from Hanoi (via Dong Dang and Pingxiang) to Nanning; by bus or rail from Hanoi and Lao Cai (via Hekou) to Kunming in Yunnan; with your own transport from Haiphong to Nanning (Guangxi) via Mong Cai and Dongxing.

Laos–China By bus from Oudomxai and Louang Namtha (via Boten/Mo Han) to Jinghong (Yunnan).

China, Mongolia and Japan

China–Mongolia By train (Trans-Mongolian Express) or bus from Beijing or Hohhot to Ulaanbaatar (via Erenhot and Zhamyn-Uud).

China (Tibet)–Nepal Informal shared jeeps via Zhangmu to Kathmandu, but not allowed going from Nepal into Tibet unless on a tour.

China–South Korea By ferry to Incheon (near Seoul) from Tianjin (near Beijing), Qingdao and Weihai (both in Shandong), and Dalian and Dandong (both in Liaoning) and Lianyungang (Jiangsu).

China–Taiwan None.

Taiwan–Japan By ferry from Keelung and Kaohsiung to Naha in Okinawa.

China–Japan By ferry from Shanghai to Osaka and Kobe, from Tianjin (near Beijing) to Kobe, and from Qingdao and Suzhou to Shimonoseki.

Japan–South Korea By ferry and hydrofoil from Shimonoseki, Fukuoka and Osaka to Busan.

because of ongoing separatist violence in far southern Thailand the safest routes are via Satun and Ko Lipe instead. Not surprisingly, Bangkok–Kuala Lumpur is a common “surface sector” leg on round-the-world, Circle-Asia and open-jaw tickets (see Chapter Two). Some people round off this overland route with a few days on the island of Singapore, which is connected to southern Malaysia by a causeway.

A relatively popular extension to the Thailand–Malaysia route is to continue on **into Indonesia by sea**. There are frequent ferries and speedboats from various ports in Malaysia to Sumatra, and from Johor Bahru and Singapore to Indonesia’s Riau archipelago.

Indochina: Thailand–Laos–Vietnam–Cambodia–Thailand

The overland trail **from Thailand across Indochina** is becoming increasingly well travelled, and makes an interesting circular route that can be done without ever taking to the air. There are numerous border crossings between Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, with through-transport available by bus or river-boat, and new routes open frequently. Visa formalities are mostly straightforward (see Chapter Two), but bear in mind that road transport in Laos and Cambodia is very slow and can be exhaustingly uncomfortable.

Overland from China to Thailand via Indochina

As China has useful land borders with both Laos and Vietnam, the Indochina circuit described above can easily be adapted into a smooth overland link **between China and Thailand**, and makes it feasible to do the entire journey from London to Ho Chi Minh City by train.

By bus from India to Nepal

Overlanding **between India and Nepal** is straightforward and popular, and a useful surface sector in Circle Asia and open-jaw tickets (see Chapter Two). There are many border crossings, but the easiest approaches are from Patna (in the state of Bihar) and Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh), which between them have useful train services to and from Delhi, Varanasi, Darjeeling, Gaya and Kolkata. Patna buses connect via Raxaul for Kathmandu while from Gorakhpur you go via Sonauli for bus connections to Pokhara or Kathmandu.

India to China via Pakistan and the Karakoram Highway

This unusual trans-Asia route is longer and more challenging than the classic version through India and Southeast Asia, as travel is relatively difficult in **Pakistan** (even dangerous in some regions, so check government

travel advisories as outlined in Chapter Fourteen) and can be irksome in **China**. Travellers are rarer, which for many is part of the appeal. Regional politics permitting, the Pakistan–China section can be woven into all sorts of Asian and round-the-world itineraries, including as the surface sector of an open-jaw return or a Circle Asia flight (described in Chapter Two) that drops you in Delhi and then takes you out of Bangkok or Singapore a few months later.

Delhi is the obvious entry point to India if you're heading up to Pakistan: it's about seven hours by train to Amritsar, where trains and buses cross to the Pakistani city of Lahore (about 12hr).

From Pakistan you can take a bus into China along the spectacular 13,000-kilometre **Karakoram Highway** (KKH), which starts in Rawalpindi and goes via Gilgit and Hunza to Kashgar in far northwest China. The journey takes about four days but is only possible between May and October when the 4695-metre Kunjerab Pass on the border is not snowbound. The KKH is also one of Asia's best known long-distance cycling routes, taking from three weeks to complete: see the box on p.31 for more info. Kashgar is on the railway line, so from here the rest of China is but a (very long) train ride away.

By sea from China and Russia to South Korea and Japan

If you're in eastern China, it's quite possible and inexpensive, if time-consuming, to take a **boat across to South Korea** (minimum 14hr) and then continue by hydrofoil or **ferry to Japan** (3–17hr); see the excellent South Korean tourist board website (@english.visitkorea.or.kr) for full details. Or you could take a direct **ferry from China to Japan** (about 4hr). There are also useful ferry services out of Vladivostok, at the end of Russia's Trans-Siberian line, to the Japanese port of Fushiki, and to Sokcho in South Korea.

Riding high

I'm not a sporty person (a school report once read "We think that Laura could enjoy PE, but we've never seen her doing any"), but since my first experience of long-distance cycling in India I haven't really looked back. I went on to complete a two-year bike trip covering the length of the Himalayas and wrote it up for *Himalaya by Bicycle* (reviewed p.31).

The cycle trips aren't about sport – it's more a way of travelling that is totally independent, and brilliantly simple: just get on the bike and ride! Buses leech energy, but travelling by bike makes you look after yourself and keeps you strong and healthy. You take in one hundred percent of what's going on around you – there's no chance to fall asleep and miss it all.

The hardest part is always leaving. I'll have the idea for the trip, tell my family about it, and then privately wonder why I want to head off for places like Pakistan by myself, on a bicycle... But the minute I sniff a new country in my nostrils, the change of heat, the light... I'm pulled in straight away.

Laura Stone

Themes for travel

Rather than base your trip round tourist sights and famous landscapes, you might consider planning it around specific **activities** instead. We've selected some popular highlights below. You'll find specialist guidebooks covering some of these themes, though any decent travel guide should have at least a few pointers on a country's most interesting activities.

Trekking and hiking

There's plenty of scope for interesting **treks and hikes** in Asia, and you don't necessarily have to be an experienced walker to enjoy them. In Asia, the word "trek" is generally used to refer to a long-distance walk, with one or more nights spent in tents or lodgings en route. "Hike" usually means a walk taking a day or less.

In many cases you can do hikes and treks unassisted, so long as you have a decent route map. But in some places you'd be foolhardy to go without a **guide**: jungles, for example, are notoriously hard to navigate, even with a map, and high mountain passes are usually best negotiated with a local expert. For long, arduous treks you'll probably need to hire a porter as well, to help carry tents and food. Travellers often join forces to arrange cheaper group treks, and in the more established places tour operators organize daily group treks along standard routes.

Don't forget to check on the **climate** (mid-June to late September, for example, is hopeless for trekking in the Himalayas), and remember to pack suitable clothes and footwear (see Chapter Six).

Here's a selective roundup of hikes and treks to whet your appetite:

- **Bhutan** Masses of hiking and trekking potential, from short, scenic walks along river valleys or up mountainsides to visit temples and monasteries, to the 24-day Lunana Snowman Trek across half of the country.
- **China** Highlights include the one- to three-day trek through the alpine scenery of Sichuan to the spectacular tongue of ice known as Hailuo Guo Glacier; hiking in the hills around Xinjiang's Tian Chi (Heaven Lake), surrounded by snowy peaks and pine forests and staying in Kazakh nomads' tents; and the two-day trek through Tiger Leaping Gorge in Yunnan, the world's deepest canyon. Much more arduous, but popular nonetheless, is the three-day, 58-kilometre circumnavigation of Tibet's sacred Mount Kailash, stopping at monasteries en route.
- **India** There are challenging Himalayan treks of two to twelve days through forests and valleys, alongside mountain streams, past remote