

ANOTHER SIDE TO ASIA

So you've done Singapore, Tokyo and Delhi?
Then it's time to broaden your travel horizon and add these
six fascinating destinations to your must-visit list.

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1 / AMRITSAR, INDIA

Until recently, Amritsar and its deep cultural roots, which date back to the mid 1500s, was overlooked as a holiday destination by Australian travellers.

In the Punjab region, 25 kilometres from the Pakistan border, Amritsar is home to one of India's holiest shrines, the *Sri Harmandir Sahib*, or Golden Temple, a significant pilgrimage destination for Sikhs. Sparkling in gold foil, the shrine sits in the middle of a man-made lake in which devotees bathe before crossing the bridge to pay their respects to the guru. Within the dazzling white marbled interior of the temple compound is the world's largest community kitchen. Manned by volunteers, the *langar* serves around 100,000 free vegetarian meals each day in dining halls that seat up to 5000 people. It's immaculately clean, and the meals are simple, nourishing and tasty.

The ancient laneways and streets leading to the Golden Temple provide a window into life here. Workshops and guesthouses, fruit vendors and cigarette sellers line the pockmarked road. Bicycles, taxis and rickshaws compete with pedestrians for right-of-way. Elderly men sit cross-legged in doorways as a smiling barber trims their hair. Turbaned men and sari-clad ladies scurry hither and thither to

The ancient laneways and streets leading to the Golden Temple provide a window into life here.

Above
Scenes from the streets of Amritsar.

Left
The Golden Temple in all its glory.

destinations unknown. Spicy aromas waft from carts piled high with samosas and other snacks.

India is famous for cheap, spicy food and Amritsar is no exception. With its strong Sikh influence, vegetarian restaurants are the norm. Most meals are a delicious variation on staples such as naan bread or roti, while dahl and *chawal* (a spicy rice dish) are washed down with a glass of *lassi* (yoghurt thinned with water and sometimes tricked-up with spices).

For a special lunchtime treat head to *Ranjit's Svaasa*, an award-winning heritage guesthouse with a beautiful garden restaurant. Their spicy chicken curry is divine and offers a welcome change in texture from plant-based meals.

The history of India and Pakistan is intimately intertwined and this is evident at the *Wagah Border Gate*, just 40 minutes from Amritsar. Each afternoon a lowering of the flag ritual (India's Flag Code decrees the national flag only be flown between sunrise and sunset) and 'Beating the Retreat' ceremony attracts crowd numbers usually seen at a day/night cricket match. Good-natured patriotic banter flies across the border as Indians and Pakistanis chant and sing. Each side tries to outdo each other and sends ripples of laughter across the crowd.

Whether you're a seasoned India traveller or a first-timer looking to dabble your toes in this intriguing country, Amritsar is unlikely to disappoint.



2 / PERHENTIAN ISLANDS, MALAYSIA

Tourist-free tropical islands are hard to come by, but the pristine cerulean waters and white-sand beaches of Malaysia’s Perhentian Islands sure do come close. In Malay, the word *perhentian* means ‘stopping point’, and that’s exactly what you’ll want to do when you catch your first glimpse of these islands, which are located 20 kilometres off the coast of Kuala Besut and accessible only by boat. The two main islands are *Kecil* (small), which lures a younger, more backpacker-style of traveller, and *Besar* (large), a hotspot for honeymooners and resort-goers.

Clockwise from above
Perhentian Islands;
Kathmandu Durbar
Square; Boudhanath.

With no cars and no buildings over two stories high, the islands offer a laid-back and secluded escape from the hustle and bustle of mainland Malaysia. Aquatic activities are the main reason people venture out to the Perhentian Islands (there are no official sites or attractions), and the crystal-clear, shallow bays have created a watery playground where visitors can swim, snorkel, scuba dive or kayak. The water is teeming with marine life, and it’s not unusual to spot sea turtles, stingrays, sharks and plenty of brightly coloured fish. If you tire of the sun and sand there are quite a few hiking trails that weave through the dense jungle and link beaches and villages.



3 / KATHMANDU, NEPAL

A popular starting point for travellers keen on hiking, Kathmandu is home to seven of Nepal’s ten UNESCO World Heritage Sites. *Kathmandu Durbar Square* is easily accessible and features ancient temples adorned with 17th century inscriptions alongside a former Royal Palace. Buddhist pilgrims flock to *Boudhanath*, significant in Tibetan Buddhism with its colossal stupa, considered one of the largest in the world. The city of approximately 1.5 million people is spread across the Kathmandu Valley in the foothills of the spectacular Himalaya Mountains. While Mount Everest and its ilk claim much of the hiking limelight, the Annapurna Ranges are equally dramatic without the high-altitude challenges. Swap Base Camp (too crowded) for a trek along the Annapurna Circuit and you’ll be treated to jaw-dropping views and ever-changing scenery. Totally worth the 18 days of sore feet and aching muscles.

4 / OSAKA, JAPAN

Japan's second largest city, Osaka, has the market cornered when it comes to dazzling displays of colour and lights. In particular, *Dotonbori Canal* is home to an eye-popping neon light and sign collection that will have you whipping out your sunglasses – even at night!

This modern reincarnation of the canal is a world away from the historical theatres, playhouses and teahouses that once graced the south bank, though if you look beyond the glitz and glow you can still find a hint of ancient Osaka.

For something equally colourful, albeit minus the flashing fluoro, head to Osaka Castle during cherry blossom season. One of Japan's most famous monuments, there's no better time to visit the historic Osaka Castle than when it's shrouded in a floral cloak of pastel pinks and bright whites. Mid-April is ideal for catching the 600 cherry blossom trees in full bloom, and while you're there you can also wander the castle grounds, which span over two square kilometres and include a teahouse and moat.



5 / TAIPEI, TAIWAN

Taiwan is probably one of Asia's most underrated countries. Its capital, Taipei, is the poster child for a modern, efficient city with a flawless, user-friendly public transport system, friendly locals who welcome visitors with open arms and food to die for.

If you don't overdose on steamed Taiwanese dumplings, you're not trying hard enough. We blame *Din Tai Fung Dumpling House*, where tastebuds are set alight with tantalising dumplings that are now so popular you can find them in 11 countries.

But for all its skyscrapers, bustling shopping strips, markets and lively nightclubs, there's also a surprising amount of green space in Taipei, and many natural attractions.

Just outside of Taipei is Mount Keelung, an extinct volcano boasting 360-degree views of the countryside. On a clear day you can even see Taipei 101 from the summit – which is 30 kilometres away! Taipei is one of the safest cities in the world too, making it immensely appealing to solo travellers.



6 / PENANG ISLAND, MALAYSIA

Penang Island is the kind of rich, aromatic island that has spices in its soul. Once a bustling port in the Malacca Straits – the heart of the spice route – Penang hit its stride after being acquired by the British East India Company in the late 1700s.

Today, the capital George Town retains much of its Colonial British East India heritage in a beguiling clash of cultures. Malay, Chinese and Indian people and Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Islamic religions all co-exist with each other comfortably.

For foodies in love with Asian cuisine, you'll love the diversity here. It's a melting pot of people and cultures, and the food options are varied, tasty and satisfying. Head out to the street and hit up the local curbside food stalls and markets – you won't be disappointed.

Architecture enthusiasts will be impressed too, with the *Sultan Abdul Halim Muadzam Shah Bridge* (the longest bridge in Southeast Asia) and *City Hall* (an incredible example of Edwardian-Baroque and Palladian design) both worth checking out.

Clockwise from above
Penang's City Hall;
Taipei morning skyline;
The bright lights of
Dotonbori Canal.

AirAsia has twice-daily flights from Avalon Airport to Kuala Lumpur. From KL, the airline connects to 130 destinations, including all of those featured in this article.
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