

## HOURLY RATING

By Philip Rowell

Everywhere in Asia has its best time, its magical hour, the time of day when you see it at its best and when you wouldn't want to be anywhere else. Travelling around the clock, Philip Rowell saddles up in the exclusive Lifestyle + Travel teleportation machine and assembles the perfect 24 hours in Asia - in the process, establishing where you'd want to be at any given time.

**7AM** Assuming an early rise - we wouldn't want to waste our perfect 24 hours snoozing - the best place to be at this hour is somewhere in the region of Kata beach, in the tourist magnet of Phuket. At this time, the sun isn't too high in the sky, so the bay is still in shadow but the water is warm. The ideal day should really include some sort of exercise so we won't feel too guilty about overindulging later, so we start with a wade into the sea at the south of Kata Noi beach, put our goggles on and commence our perfect freestyle stroke to head north. Across the bay, around the headland, out to sea, back in again to land up at Kata Yai, and a short run back to Kata Noi to dry off and make up the 60 minutes to 8 o'clock.

**8AM** This hour means a coffee and a leisurely read of a quality morning paper, preferably surrounded by a buzzy morning vibe. Those criteria, applied together, mean only one place: the legendary New South Wales capital, where bad coffee seems to have been outlawed by federal decree and the Sydney Morning Herald is substantial enough to while away at least an hour with a perfect combination of serious news, gossipy trash and audacious real estate deals. We set the coordinates of our magical traveling machine directly to Five Ways in Paddington, where there are any number of quirky and cool al fresco cafes where we can pop ourselves down in the sun and enjoy a frothy cappuccino.

**9AM** At certain times of day, it's a tossup between several locations as to where is the best place to be. But for breakfast, there's only one possible choice: the city that perfected the art of breakfast, the place that invented a whole culinary culture that has now spread and sees cities all over the world attempting to emulate its offerings. Of course, we're talking about none other than Hong Kong for dim sum. It's a difficult task to find a bad dim sum house in Hong Kong: there are so many good ones that a bad one would go out of business in a matter of weeks. But for an authentic experience, we travel directly to Fung Shing Restaurant in On Tai Street, Sheung Wan, for the original take on the art form with surly waitresses pushing steaming carts from table to table. No need for Cantonese language skills; we just point at what we want and it is slammed down in front of us with the sort of charm that only Hong Kong serving staff can muster.

**10AM** At this stage, the sensible course of action is to bring the pace of the day down a little. After all, there's a long way to go; we wouldn't want to deplete ourselves too early. Continuing the urban theme, but with a slightly more relaxed slant on affairs, 10 o'clock of our perfect day sees us sitting in Holland Village, in the west of Singapore, sipping another coffee - this time a longer version, a mocha, while catching up on the gossip with Singapore's matinee mummies and reading the latest edition of one of the many cool monthly Singapore publications from the Indian magazine stall on the corner.

# 11AM

- What? We've done so much already, but still two hours until lunch? So be it: the best way to fill the time, while our minds are still active, is without doubt something educational and fulfilling. 11 o'clock finds us in the heart of Bangkok, at the Thailand Creative & Design Centre on the top floor of Emporium. Usually open to members only but available to travellers for a nominally-priced tourist pass, the TCDC is a treasure trove of art and design books, obscure DVDs and world-class travelling exhibitions from the British Library, Paris' Musee d'Orsay and any number of stellar global institutions.

**1PM** - It would be easy to spend the entire day at the TCDC, so rich is the wealth of material there, but we have a job to do. Lunchtime beckons, and that means one thing. With all of Asia available to us, our culinary compass points to none other than Brussels, Belgium. Little Brussels to be precise - Le Petit Bruxelles, the classic Belgian restaurant in the heart of Hanoi. Fresh mussels, perfectly chilled rosé wine, appallingly appealing chocolate desserts and irresistible French calvados to finish our meal - all in the gorgeous surrounds of a tastefully renovated colonial French villa in Tran Quoc Toan - sees us lingering here for two hours to do justice to the delights on offer.

# 3PM

- No matter what the geographical location, the perfect day must include some sort of self-pampering - the more the better. From Hanoi it is an easy matter for us to pop up in Malaysia's Langkawi, where the combination of perfect tropical foliage, gorgeous clear seas, and the relaxation-inducing heavy grey clouds along the skyline provide the perfect backdrop for an exotic spa therapy. Despite finding itself in Malaysia, the Datai wisely gives more than a nod to its northern neighbour Thailand with its healthy massages and other slimming spa treatments. A couple of hours of this and we've forgotten our moules marinières and gateaux in Hanoi, and we're almost ready to begin another round of ridiculous gluttony in the fast-approaching evening.

**5PM** - It's terrible how time flies. A whole day gone, and not a bit of shopping has been achieved. In light of time pressures, we simply have to think in terms of efficiency, and that can only mean retracing our steps to Bangkok. There may be better malls, there may be greater selections spread over entire cities, but Bangkok has the edge on sheer concentration of high-end shopping opportunities in one small area. Starting at Siam Paragon for quality fashion, we flit through Siam Square for quirky one-off pieces, blaze through Gaysorn Plaza for something exclusive and expensive, bust a move through Siam Discovery Centre for natty Thai interior design, and finish our tour of duty (via Central Chidlom) at Emporium to pick up the latest grey import mobile phone and a few kilos of otherwise hard-to-find tropical fruits from the supermarket to take home.

# 7PM

Thus satisfied, we can begin to think about dinner, but naturally not before an aperitif or three. For a spectacular beginning to the evening, we can think of nothing better than a few cocktails at M On The Bund. Shanghai has many new pretenders, all attempting to emulate the grande old dame of the Huangpu River, but the original has not yet been beaten. Lifting a frosted glass to our mouths, overlooking the barges honking along the river while the iconic red and gold flags flutter in the evening breeze, we can't resist drinking a toast to Marx and Lenin for the communist philosophy that ensured all of this historic heritage remains in existence for our enjoyment.

**8PM** - Dinner beckons. After a full day, we are in no mood to impress anybody, but we do want something stylish, with a bit of drama to boot. The FCC Angkor - with its perfect combination of comfort food, historically sinister location and fascinating international clientele - is just what we require. A decent bottle of Australian wine, the fans whirling overhead, the fresh breeze coming off the river, the mysterious smell of Cambodia on the evening air - we couldn't have chosen a better place. We had allocated two hours here, but end up lingering longer over one too many amarettos - but who's counting here?

# 10:59PM

Bali. Bali! You mean we haven't been to Bali today? What were we thinking? We recitify the situation before anybody realizes our mistake, and just make it into Ubud's Bukit Becik Bar a minute before closing time. The waiter tries to tell us we're too late, but we insist that we've been here all along and he's simply failed to notice us because of the tastefully subdued lighting, and our cool persuasiveness wins the day. An hour of sipping perfumed cocktails in the heady forest air follows, and we can rest easy in the knowledge that this fabled island has been ticked off on our itinerary.

## 12AM

We're pleasantly surprised how often in our perfect day we keep finding ourselves drawn back to Bangkok. It's hard to beat the Bangkok banyakaat (atmosphere); and at this hour, with the early curfew in mind, there is a delicious desperation in the air with the beautiful people of the city determined to cram maximum enjoyment into minimum hours. Frenetic Soi 11 is still the epicenter of the action, with Q Bar, Bed Supperclub and a host of surrounding satellite establishments providing sufficient diversions until closing time.

# 2AM

Other than a few excitingly illicit late-night boites, Bangkok's nightlife is short-lived these days. No matter. We find our own entertainment at Pak Klomg Talat - the riverside wholesale flower market where the whole of the city comes to stock up on fresh roses and jasmine garlands. Dodging the buyers from the city's finest hotels looking to fill their rooms with the magnificent blooms on offer, we make a beeline for the old woman in the middle of the market for her unfailingly fresh lilies to fill our apartment with their exotic scent - leaving ourselves time for a quick bowl of noodles at the stall by the canal on the way out.

# 3AM

We can sleep tomorrow. For now, there's only one way to finish off the day. And that's with possibly Asia's finest late-night snack creation: roti canai. 3am finds us in Malaysia's famous muddy estuary, otherwise known as Kuala Lumpur, ravenously devouring our roti telur (egg) while sharing our stories of the day and sipping on delicious teh halia (ginger tea).

## 4AM

For a moment, sated after our excessive consumption of fried egg, flour and curry in KL, we had thought of calling time on proceedings. But in the interests of editorial professionalism, we shake off our weariness and determinedly press on. 4am sees us heading south, back in Singapore on Sentosa Island, at the beachside Ibiza import Café del Mar. (We may have neglected to mention that our ideal day falls on a Friday; the one night when the shoreline crowd is guaranteed to last until dawn.) With the downtempo beats, the cool sea breeze, the minty mojitos and the comforting murmur of sleepy fellow revelers, we manage to spend a couple of hours reviewing the events of the day before pushing on to our final episode.

## 6AM

It's been quite a day. To bring ourselves safely down after such prolonged excitement, we make a beeline for Beijing, where every available public space is filled with tai qi quan practitioners. What with several years of untrammled development, Beijing may not be the gorgeous lane-filled place it once was, but there is still enough of the old imperial city - for now, at any rate - for us to find the right position to look over the timeless hutongs and imagine ourselves moving gracefully through space in a more genteel era. An hour of flowing movement and faultless internal muscle control sees our body and our spirit cleansed, and the end of our perfect Asian 24-hour adventure. There's only one remaining journey to make: the journey back home to bed to refill our energy reserves for the next assignment and congratulate ourselves on an excellent use of the time allocated to us.