



Asia's Top 10 Idyllic Isles

Asia is famous for one thing above all else: islands. Indonesia has more than 17,000 of them; the Philippines boasts 7,107. There are 2,000 in Vietnam's Halong Bay alone. With such a massive choice, how does anyone actually choose? By reading *lifestyle + travel's* definitive guide to the region's top 10 idyllic isles.





Bali

Indonesia's jewel, and one of the world's most popular travel destinations, Bali has it all: great beaches, fantastic surf, resorts to die for, spas to rival any in the world, a fantastically rich cuisine (unique in Indonesia), art protruding from practically every crevice, and a vivid culture that successfully manages to blend Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. OK, so it's not quite perfect: the Bali bombings by Javanese Islamic fanatics in 2002 dampened the spirits of many international tourists, and another spate of bombings in 2005 almost killed the growing confidence in the island's safety. But, as New York, London and Madrid have already shown, the effect of terrorism is merely temporary, and the island has recently regained momentum. As the hosts of the inaugural Asian Beach Games last year, Bali is back and better than ever.

Boracay

Ranked along the likes of Samui, Bali and Langkawi, Boracay is the Philippines ultimate island destination, with everyone from hippies to Britney Spears flocking to its secluded beaches and balmy climate. While the country as a whole suffers from frequent natural disasters, political corruption and terrorism in its southern regions, Boracay seems eternally immune to the occasional strife of the rest of the country. Historically, the island was a well-guarded secret, and almost no one outside of the country knew of its existence. It was only when a foreign movie crew stumbled across this slice of paradise (some say it was the German Jan Paters' who mentioned it as an Asian El Dorado in his book) in the 1970s that its pristine white beaches began to gain international recognition. In the 1980s and 90s it was in possession of backpackers before becoming the destination of choice for the international elite. Today, it is ranked as having some of Asia's top beaches.



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime

Cat Ba

In the centre of the astonishing collection of karst formations in Halong Bay, northern Vietnam, Cat Ba Island is one of the best known overnight stopping places for the numerous cruise ships that herd the thousands of tourists around the region and weave between the awesome scenery. But far from being littered with cheap hotels and the detritus of transient tourism, Cat Ba has managed to control the effects of the flood of tourists and far from becoming a stopover has become a destination in its own right. Large enough to get away from the crowds at the piers, and yet small enough to traverse on foot, the island is home to the Cat Ba Langur, the most endangered primate species in Asia, along with a whole host of awesome wildlife including civet cats and oriental giant squirrels. And it is from the top of some of the island's highest peaks that you can catch some of Asia's most picturesque sunsets as well as one of the best views of the stunning Halong Bay.



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime

Langkawi

There's something odd about mainland Malaysia. It has all the ingredients to be great but somehow never seems to hit the mark. Langkawi archipelago is where it does. Ninety-nine islands (with an additional five that are revealed at low tide) make up this extraordinarily vibrant island destination just south of the Thai border, the jewel being the main island, Pulau Langkawi. Awarded World Geopark status by UNESCO in 2007, the island is teeming with wildlife both above and below the waves. With better beaches than nearby Penang, a resort scene that is more reminiscent of Thailand in terms of standards and slightly more predictable weather than Phuket, Langkawi remains one of Malaysia's biggest assets.



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime

Lombok

Bali's neighbour and therefore frequently overshadowed, Lombok is habitually termed the "unspoiled Bali" or the "next Bali" which does it almost no justice at all. Despite their proximity, Bali and Lombok are worlds apart: while Bali is predominantly Hindu, Lombok is Muslim, giving the island a totally different character. The beaches here boast a weathered charm, and while the accommodation can't really compete with Bali, if it is pristine isolation you're looking for then Lombok wins hands down, not least on the adjacent Gili Islands, which, thanks to *Eat, Pray, Love* have become a mecca for all those looking to nurse a broken heart.

Perhentian Islands

Ask most people where the Perhentian Islands are, and they'd probably point you in the direction of Greece, which is a shame really because these two unspoiled treasures should be some of the most visited attractions in Malaysia. In the Gulf of Thailand, not far south from Samui, the Perhentian Islands are some of the best islands on which to play Robinson Crusoe. Bright white sand, crystal clear sea and turtles galore, the islands are a haven for snorkellers and divers. The accommodation ranges from beach shacks to really quite respectable resorts, though you are unlikely to find a double pool villa here. The best way to see the islands is by boat, which is also the only way to get to the islands, the jumping off point on the mainland being Kota Bharu.



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime

Phi Phi

Few islands in the world have lent themselves so strongly to fiction than Thailand's Koh Phi Phi. If not the setting of the novel, then the Thai island most associated with *The Beach* (part of it was filmed on Koh Phi Phi Lei), Koh Phi Phi has long won over the hearts of the millions of backpackers that pour through Thailand annually. With brilliant beaches, a stunning geography, a relatively convenient location while evoking the feeling that you are a million miles away from the stresses of the modern world, Phi Phi has come back stronger after being devastated by the 2004 Asian Tsunami. And with a growing band of super luxurious resorts opening on the island and changing the demographics from backpackers to the jet set, never has there been a better time to head there.



Phuket

There is very little to say about Phuket that has not been said before. Being one of Asia's oldest and best developed tourist islands, Phuket has become synonymous with paradise and carries as much weight as Capri and Bora Bora among those looking for pure indulgence. However, such overexposure should have killed the island dead: after all, who wants to visit an island that practically everyone has already been to? Thanks to a growing community of Thai and expats dedicated to making sure that Phuket never loses its shine, Phuket looks set to endure for some time yet.



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime

Phu Quoc

Actually a stone's throw from the coast of Cambodia (and called Koh Tral by Cambodians) this Vietnamese island is Indochina's answer to the success of the Thai islands, only it is about three decades behind. Historically a backwater best known for black pepper and fish sauce, sovereignty disputes meant that the island was only ceded to the Vietnamese as late as 1979. Which is the central reason for much of its charm. While many of Thailand's islands come under attack for being overbuilt and for eradicating local culture, Phu Quoc is precisely the opposite: you're far more likely to be ensnared in a local fishing net than be hit by some tourist on a jet ski here. But with more frequent flights from Ho Chi Minh every year, it won't be long before Phu Quoc will be a boom town: if it's seclusion you're after, get there now.

Samui

Mention Thailand and most people think of Koh Samui, the heart of Thailand's massive tourism industry slap bang in the middle of the Gulf. Formerly renowned as the place which had more coconut palms per square metre than anywhere else in the world, more recently the coconuts have been replaced by luxury hotels. Water sports, jungle treks, fine dining, scuba diving, fishing, sailing, spa treatments, nightlife: whatever you're after, you're sure to find it here. And with air connections from all major Southeast Asian conurbations, it couldn't be easier to get to, meaning that you can happily avoid the bumpy boat journey that once typified island travel in Southeast Asia.

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