

# THE GREAT ASIAN BEACH FINDER

THE WORLD'S LARGEST LANDMASS HAS ITS SHARE OF LEGENDARY SHORES. CYNTHIA ROSENFELD TRAVELS TO 12 COUNTRIES TO SUSS OUT 33 STRANDS TAILORED TO EVERY TASTE AND BUDGET—ALONG WITH WHERE TO EAT, SLEEP, PARTY, PLAY, AND BE PAMPERED

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
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Land ho! Each of the six villas at Dhoni Mig-hili, a two-and-a-half-acre resort island in the Maldives' North Ari Atoll, comes with a 65-foot sailboat modeled on the wooden dhonis used by the ancient Phoenicians.

## 33 BEST BEACHES

### OVERALL

INDIA: Beach No. 7, Havelock Island  
INDONESIA: Nihiwatu Beach, Sumba Island  
MALDIVES: Baa, North Ari, and North Malé atolls  
PHILIPPINES: Palawan Province  
THAILAND: Koh Phi Phi

### BEACH HOTELS

CAMBODIA: Knai Bang Chatt, Kep  
MALDIVES: Huvafen Fushi, North Malé Atoll  
PHILIPPINES: Amanpulo, Pamalican Island  
THAILAND: Amanpuri, Phuket  
VIETNAM: Nam Hai, China Beach

### BEACH PARTIES

INDONESIA: Ku De Ta, Bali  
SINGAPORE: Sentosa Island  
SRI LANKA: Wijaya Beach  
THAILAND: Amanpuri, Phuket; Full Moon Party, Koh Phangan

### BEACH SCENERY

CHINA: The Great Wall, Lao Long Tou  
INDONESIA: Komodo dragons, Komodo National Park; Tanah Lot Temple, Bali  
JAPAN: Hot-sand baths, Kyushu Island  
SRI LANKA: Stilt fishermen, Weligama

### BEACH SPAS

INDONESIA: Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay  
MALAYSIA: Four Seasons Resort, Langkawi  
MALDIVES: Huvafen Fushi, North Malé Atoll  
THAILAND: Kamalaya, Koh Samui; The Sarojin, Khao Lak

### BEACH SPORTS

INDONESIA: Diving, Banda Sea; surfing, Sumba Island  
MALDIVES: Sailing, North Ari Atoll; surfing, North Malé Atoll  
PHILIPPINES: Diving, Bacuit Bay

**F**ORGIVE ME IF I FEEL COMPELLED TO DEBUNK the myth of the Asian beach. This vast geographic expanse, with its exotic islands, fabled archipelagoes, and crenelated coastlines, offers few exquisite and accessible strands compared with, say, the Caribbean or the Mediterranean. "Nonsense," barked everyone with whom I discussed this assignment. When asked for nominations, however, the so-called experts divulged a mere handful and the neophytes conjured a largely mythical Bali Ha'i.

From the North Pacific to the Indian Ocean, rare and tantalizing natural attributes do indeed yield waters from cobalt to lavender, sands so fine that they are without discernible grains, and kaleidoscopic sea life which reminds even the most jaded traveler that we are blessed to live on this breathtaking planet. Arab mariners agreed, bestowing the name Serendib ("Serendipity") on the teardrop isle we now call Sri Lanka, while British and Dutch forces fought for centuries over Indonesia's two-mile-long Run Island—its nutmeg sold in Europe at prices on a par with gold.

But almost as legendary are the threats associated with Asian shores, especially haunting for indigenous communities still struggling to recover from the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami that killed more than 200,000. Man-made but also disastrous, the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings keep a U.S. Department of State travel warning in effect. And even smiling Thailand wound up in the headlines last year on account of a bloodless military coup. While these events no longer pose a clear and present danger, it was with safety in mind that we omitted from our list certain other sweeps of sand—at least until gun-toting separatists leave Sri Lanka's Arugam Bay and the ethnic rebellion is history for the Philippines' Mindanao Island.

More happily redolent of the region's beaches are the global standard bearers of five-star hospitality and the out-of-this-world beauty and health treatments that can be had at seriously down-to-earth prices. Of course, reputation only goes so far. On Boracay Island, in the Philippines, once routinely ranked among the world's best beaches, I saw more trash than seashells. Less than 48 hours later, however, I sailed along the untouched sands of up-and-coming Langkawi, Malaysia's 99-island archipelago. I even shed a few tears as I left my last footprints on Indonesia's Nihiwatu Beach (I've already made plans to return). In the end, the results of this intrepid survey prove that Asia is, after all, deserving of its reputation for spectacular sands—in quality if not in supposed quantity; one need only know where to look.

## BEST BEACHES OVERALL

### PALAWAN, PHILIPPINES

The Palawan Province's 1,200 miles of sugary beaches wrapped around 1,780 pristine islands have attracted travelers since Chinese traders crossed now-sunken land bridges from Borneo. Its rich ecosystem supports two UNESCO World Heritage Sites: coral-rich Tubbataha Reef Marine Park and Puerto-Princesa Subterranean River National Park, a limestone karst landscape with an underground tributary that emerges into the sea. Almost as unique is **Miniloc Island Resort**, where a private beach leads to crystalline waters rife with damselfish (El Nido Resorts, 63-2-894-5644; [elnidoresorts.com](http://elnidoresorts.com); doubles, \$400-\$580, all-inclusive; for more information, see *Condé Nast Traveler's* twelfth annual "Green List," September 2006). Sister property **Lagen Island Resort's** 51 newer overwater pavilions (doubles, \$540-\$640, all-inclusive) are overshadowed only by **Amanpulo**, Amanresorts' 40 huts scattered along Pamalican Island's powdery strand (63-2-759-4040; [amanresorts.com](http://amanresorts.com); doubles, \$575-\$750). For more of the best beaches overall, see page 234.



Sheer heaven: Dalujo Beach, on Miniloc, one of the 1,780 mostly uninhabited islands that constitute the Philippines' Palawan Province.

## BEST BEACH SPAS

HUVAFEN FUSHI,  
NORTH MALÉ ATOLL,  
MALDIVES

Instead of staring at the standard frangipani-filled bowl, I watched floating parades of parrot fish and octopuses and the ribbon-like fins of lionfish at this 43-room resort's ultra-cool all-white Lime spa, with two treatment rooms located 12 feet below the surface of the Indian Ocean and another six overwater rooms, all with glass floors. I was equally impressed by the six Energy Rituals designed for this aquatic environment, during which the therapist's coconut oil-saturated hands judiciously added pressure using indigenous hand-carved rolling pins.

(Lime's therapists improvise their treatments on the basis of a conversation beforehand and their own healing strengths.) For two and a half hours, I was lulled into such a state of relaxation by her powerful thumbs and balanced, full-body strokes that I gave up counting sea creatures (960-664-4222; huvafenfushi.com; doubles, \$900-\$1,700; 2½- to 3-hour Energy Rituals, \$395-\$495). For more great beach spas, see page 234.



Made in the shade: Huvafen Fushi's Lime spa has six overwater and two underwater treatment rooms; guests can also be pampered at bungalows scattered throughout the 12-acre property.



Heavenly bodies: Monthly full-moon raves on Haad Rin Nok Beach draw thousands to Thailand's Koh Phangan during high season.

## BEST BEACH PARTIES

FULL MOON PARTY,  
THAILAND

What began as a casual gathering of backpacking trance dancers along Koh Phangan's Haad Rin Nok Beach in the late 1980s has grown into monthly all-night raves attracting tens of thousands in high season (Dec.–April and July–Sept.). Asia's most outrageous party is said to have lured some important deejays, but I couldn't distinguish a musical genre—only a mind-numbing beat that impelled the bouncing bodies, many covered in glow-in-the-dark paint. Curiosity satisfied, I hired one of the speedboats that ply the Gulf of Thailand all night long and headed back to my sea-facing suite at the **Four Seasons Resort Koh Samui** (66-77-243-000; [fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com); doubles, \$410–\$1,100).

For more great beach parties, see page 234.



## BEST BEACH SCENERY

STILT FISHERMEN,  
SRI LANKA

"Whatever happens out there, you don't touch another man's pole," explained Swiss transplant Dominique Nordmann as we surveyed the landscape from **Amapola**, his four-bedroom clifftop villa at Weligama, near Sri Lanka's southern tip (94-77-756-0985; weligama.net; \$750-\$950 per night). The only humans between us and the South Pole on an already sultry January morning were a handful of the iconic stilt fishermen, each perched on the narrow crossbar of a long wooden pole stuck into the seabed several dozen yards offshore. Later, my Sri Lankan friend Puja Srivastava explained that while the origins of this acrobatic tradition are unknown, each stilt has been handed down from father to son for centuries. Legs akimbo, the men cast their lines, mostly for tiny white fish called *bowla*. Salvador Quiroz, project coordinator for the nonprofit Paavima, told me of his own failed attempt at this esoteric ritual. "You must understand well the subtle wrist movement needed to seduce little *bowla* to bite without falling in yourself," he said. In addition to replacing the stilts and encouraging more productive practices through the sharing of perches, Paavima has sought to lessen the community's dependence on fishing by certifying some of the men as PADI Divemasters so they can tap into Sri Lanka's tourism industry as more than a photo op. *For more beach scene stealers, see page 234.*

Something special in the air: Stilt fishermen have been plying their trade along Sri Lanka's southern Weligama Beach for centuries.

## BEST BEACH HOTELS

### AMANPULO, PHILIPPINES

In Beach Casita No. 24, a low-slung bungalow at Amanresorts' most romantic Asian property, glass walls optimize Sulu Sea views framed by lush foliage thick with black-naped orioles and neon-blue Steere's pittas. Twenty-nine suites just like this encircle the private 220-acre Pamalican Island, 225 miles south of Manila. At midday, as the beach turned foot-searingly hot, I caught a ride out to the floating Kawayan Bar, replete with fluffy towel-covered cushions and Marlon the bartender.

Flying fish burst through the glassy green surface, and the sun pulsated all afternoon in defiance of the so-called rainy season (65-6887-3337; amanresorts.com; beach casitas, \$650).

*For more great beach hotels, see page 234.*

Surreal estate: Amanpulo's 40 freestanding casitas occupy a private island in the Philippines' Sulu Sea; meals are taken at the Beach Club House (pictured).