

(Continued from page 172) who set me up with a properly tough hybrid actually large enough for a foreigner. Having tested the brakes in the parking lot, I ventured into a streaming bike lane and headed for Long Jing (“Dragon Well”), the artesian spring that is the font for China’s most famous and beloved tea. Dragon Well is the Bordeaux of Chinese teas and comprises all the tea grown in the valleys around Hangzhou that are watered by this one source, located high in the bamboo hillsides outside the city. I’d watched its traditional preparation at various places around town, from a Qing dynasty teahouse on Wushan Square to the daily demonstrations at the Fuchun using the hotel’s own harvest. It starts with the same bright-green leaves that are in all true tea, which are laid out in a bamboo basket to dry slightly before being withered by hand-stirring for ten or twelve minutes in a warm wok. Once the leaves have shrunk to a dark, brittle green, they are quickly cooled in a second basket.

Although it is a hotly debated point, the best brew may be made from the waters of Dragon Well itself. The result is a mild tannic “green tea” that is actually the palest of yellows. Sipped slowly from tall, thin glasses, it is an astringent drink that sharpens the senses in a place that deserves sharp senses.

With a cheap tourist map from the concierge—and little more Mandarin than is needed to ask the question, “Where is Dragon Well?”—I pedaled my way around West Lake. The streets were good, marked with bike lanes that everyone ignored. I passed the ancient Evening Sunlight at Thunder Peak Pagoda, which is, in a sense, brand-new: This towering seven-story stupa with commanding views of West Lake was actually rebuilt in 2002. (By day, it looked venerable, but when I biked past it again the next night, multicolored neon lights hidden under the eaves made it glow like a Ferris wheel.) The same was true of the Sung dynasty’s Imperial Palace, which was already in ruins when Polo saw it, yet today appears newly refurbished.

It wasn’t hard to find the route to Dragon Well, since the little valleys have only one road each. After just twenty minutes, I was out of urban Hangzhou and into the tea fields, passing ponds, plantations, and the strikingly ugly houses of some of the wealthiest farmers in China.

Hangzhou’s tea industry is big business and has all the requisite snobs, tycoons, trade shows, and luxury pilgrims. The fields were dotted with pickers, men and (more commonly) women hovering over

the knee-high rows of bushes, meditatively plucking individual leaves, stuffing them into wicker baskets that rode on their hips, much like trout creels in England. The most precious tea in China is “first leaf,” traditionally harvested before April 5. I’d arrived at the end of the month, as the harvest was wrapping up.

ALTHOUGH LOCAL DRAGON Well tea sells for the highest prices in China, there is nothing to stop anyone from calling their tea Dragon Well. “Now that name is used all over China,” said Sebastian Beckwith, founder of In Pursuit of Tea, a Connecticut-based importer. Beckwith has taken clients through Hangzhou’s tea markets and atmospheric (as in musty) old teahouses. “There is no definition of origin with teas like there is with wine,” he said. “So, unfortunately, you do get counterfeit Dragon Well.” If the people of Hangzhou have their way, a new appellation system will be put in place within the next few years. Still, in a land of fragrant fakes, the only way to be sure of

what you are getting is to go to the source. So I tried. The road to the actual Dragon Well climbed and became narrow, hemmed in by forest. I huffed up two switchbacks before encountering a sign that warned NO BICYCLES. When a tour bus hurtled around a tight corner, I understood why. I meekly turned around and, coasting downhill, stopped instead at the National Tea Museum, a complex of about a dozen buildings scattered across a hillside tea plantation. There were picnic grounds and a burbling stream carrying the cold outflow of the hidden Dragon Well.

After getting a history of the tea bush, its multiple uses and vital role in global trade, Chinese feudalism, and imperialism; after hearing about the many and varied techniques for infusing different flavors and colors into what is, after all, a single plant; after studying the bubbling, steaming-in-wall display of three different methods of boiling water (too little, just right, and too much); and after learning the “nodding Phoenix” technique of pouring water onto tea leaves—only then did I

Word Trips

Space Travel

By Emily Cox and Henry Rathvon

Use the clues to come up with seven five-letter words. Write each word below its clue, one letter per blank, and then transfer the letters to the appropriate numbered squares in the grid. Add letters to the unnumbered squares in each row of the grid to spell out the name of a U.S. city or town. The letters you added to those spaces, taken in order, provide a possible motto for near-future travelers—and the answer to this month’s puzzle.

1	2		3	4		5
6	7			8	9	10
11	12	13		14	15	
16	17	18	19		20	
21		22		23	24	25
	26	27	28	29		30
31		32	33	34	35	

- Where a compass needle points
23 6 14 18 31
- Author of *Robinson Crusoe*
27 17 3 22 35
- Hailing from Cork or Limerick
24 19 9 29 13
- Bamboo-eating “bear” of China
8 4 30 16 26
- Oktoberfest dance with hops
21 5 7 34 11
- Tribe of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse
15 20 33 2 25
- Deer pal of Flower and Thumper
1 10 12 32 28

JULY’S PUZZLE ANSWER: Go to page 206.

Enter your answer online at cntraveler.com/wordtrips/October. No purchase necessary. Full rules and entry form available online at this address. All correct answers will be included in a drawing for the annual prize: a spa resort weekend for two (approximate retail value, \$2,500). Entries must be received by 11:59 P.M. E.T. on October 31, 2007, when the contest ends. Contest open to legal residents of the United States and Canada (excluding Quebec) age 18 and older. Odds of winning depend on the number of correct entries received. Answer will be published in the January 2008 issue. Sponsored by Condé Nast Traveler, 4 Times Square, New York, New York 10036.



realize that you don't drink tea for the flavor.

Tea's popularity had spread via Buddhist monks, who were forbidden to eat or sleep during long study sessions. Tea kept them alert, and the unadulterated taste that I find bitter was, on an empty stomach, an alluring blend of herbal concentrate and appetite-killing tartness. In 1391, a Ming emperor said it plainly: Tea was prepared and drunk for the moral effects, not the taste. His words were a moment of liberation for me—even the emperor of China didn't like tea!

"Of course, they drank tea because they were thirsty," Hai Chang of the China Institute told me, "but that wasn't the only reason. It was a matter of appreciating the tea ware, the best water for the tea, the most suitable fuel for boiling it, the tea leaf. These were all important because they made drinking tea an art, part of pursuing a refined, poetic life. And when the literati got together they needed something to drink besides wine."

TRAVEL WITHIN CHINA IS FAMOUSLY INFAMOUS, a rapidly improving brew of timeless antiquities and turbid masses, sublime insights and ruinous encounters. Privacy and individual space hardly exist, apologizing may be rude and staring polite, and laughter can indicate discomfort, not happiness. Nodding, like pushing and shoving, means nothing at all. There are few moments and places where China is peaceful, quiet, and empty; no wonder people escape from Shanghai to Hangzhou.

Nine nights brought a change to the city and to my experience of it. I began severely jet-lagged, rising long before dawn and walking the Su Causeway across West Lake before it filled up, sitting with the placid fishermen and their poles and watching the famous

peaks-in-the-mist view unfurl as the day progressed. In the afternoons, I would rent a mountain bike and hold off sleep by riding around the lake or to the sights scattered in the hills: the Silk Museum, covering thousands of years of sericulture and global trade, and the restaurants and tea gardens hidden among the bamboo groves. I sometimes ended up in the bar of the elegant Hyatt, the best-looking contemporary building in Hangzhou, but I couldn't get a room—it was May Day, the first day of Golden Week, a traditional holiday blown up to untraditional proportions by the rise of a new middle class. Chinese vacationers had flooded into Hangzhou, crowding the causeways, packing the bike lanes, spreading out picnics and pouring tea at every beautiful spot, patch of grass, pagoda, temple, fortress, and sacred site within rifle shot of West Lake. Every road was a traffic jam.

The crowds can stun, even after much experience. China on the march is a sight that resets your understanding of the relative size of the world. It is frustrating but also humbling to share a languid place like Hangzhou with the new Chinese. Mao cannot rope off this city anymore.

After decades of ascetic communism and a generation of frantic consumerism, Hangzhou is one of the few places in China that has paused, taken a breath, and decided not to trash the old. In recent years, the city has resurrected "a real culture of going and hanging out and drinking tea, with both ancient teahouses and modern, updated versions," Beckwith said.

There are teahouses in Hangzhou catering to every taste, from ancient kitsch to urban hip. There are mass-market versions such as the Qing Teng Tea House—located directly across from a Starbucks and with much the same atmosphere—and upscale ones like Vogue Tea Bar, a venue of luxurious red banquettes that must be reserved in advance, each equipped with a toy roulette wheel and serviced by black-sheathed waitresses. I myself settled into the homey, bohemian He Cha Guan, off Wushan Square. It has antique statues of dancing demons, Qing dynasty paintings, fish tanks, and collections of elegant tea ware, as well as a pleasantly disheveled atmosphere, with children running wild, bursting into my curtained-off corner to practice their English. What all these teahouses share is the food. Tea in China is taken with a combination of snacks that can bewilder the Earl Grey crowd—unfamiliar buffets larded with Asian persimmons, hard-boiled eggs, steamed and jellied sea creatures, chocolate cake, and squares of sulfurous tofu.

At He Cha Guan, I went to the poles of the tea experience. I started with a classic glass of Dragon Well, with its now familiar yellow tinge, and then switched to a mysterious deep-black brew from Yunnan. This may be where the tea bush originated, but the smoky concoction was overwhelming to me, a slap in the face after the subtlety of Dragon Well. Life has its little setbacks. So I took Beckwith's advice and, after finishing the dregs of the Yunnan and nosing on the buffet, went downstairs and behind the building to an anonymous little shop that promised me one heck of a beating.

I was timid, I admit: I had never had a professional Chinese foot massage before. The attendants were neatly attired in red uniforms, and the bright, cool room was tempting. Before I knew what I was doing, I had agreed to a haircut. I did need one, but what I got was a fifteen-minute scalp and shoulder massage with a little hair trimming. Finally, I was ready for the real thing. Joining a half-dozen Chinese customers, I lay back in a deep lounge chair and allowed my feet to be undressed and soaked in a hot mineral solution for ten minutes. This was followed by an hour-long pounding, probing, digging, jabbing, smoothing, caressing, scrubbing, pulling, and general worshipping of my toes the likes

of which I have never before experienced. When it was done, I felt about foot massages the way Polo felt about Hangzhou's courtesans: "Strangers who have once tasted their attractions seem to get bewitched, and are so taken with their blandishments and their fascinating ways that they never can get these out of their heads. Hence it comes to pass that when they return home they say they have been to . . . the City of Heaven, and their only desire is to get back thither as soon as possible."

Crowds? Golden Week? Bring it on.

MY BREAKTHROUGH REALIZATION came, as these tend to, after a brisk bit of exercise. I rented another bicycle from the health club at the Shangri-La Hotel, donned a helmet and a bad case of denial, and headed west around the lake for another attempt at Dragon Well.

To me, the western shore of West Lake is the most beautiful, with its vistas back over the causeways toward the downtown skyline. That's my *shan shui*, and in some places, where there was a bicycle lane, I was able to steal glimpses of the view as I rode through the cool morning air. But often I had to remain focused on the traffic: Pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers of everything from silent electric scooters to smoke-spewing trucks careened at will in all directions, ignoring lights, signals, signs, bike lanes, and even policemen with batons. I am used to commuting by bicycle in New York City; China is a whole new level of crazy.

But I have to recommend it anyway. Now, late into Golden Week, I wended my way through a Hangzhou paralyzed by gridlock, part of the great river of bicycling Chinese, a society of equals. Locals gawked: A foreigner on a bicycle! "Hello! Hello!" cried beautiful women and old men and idiot teenagers. My passage was greeted with a chorus of approval. It was an effortful, slow, mindful way to see the city, appropriate to the celestial side of life.

The bicycle made China smile at me. The country I had visited for eighteen years came flooding back to me on my ride: the determination and strength of its people; the pride in their collective achievements, new and old; the crafty wisdom embodied in the world's longest-running civilization. When the road turned away from the lake, I stopped for a while and peered into the cold, tranquil water of a stream that fed into it. Tiny orange koi twitched in the current; this was the end of not just a mountain spring but *the* mountain spring: Somewhere up in the hills was the actual Dragon Well.

I rode another few minutes along the Dragon Well road, which now began to rise steeply, heading into forested hills. I passed the National Tea Museum and once more reached the sign that forbade anyone to ride a bicycle up the hill. After a week of cycling with the Chinese, I'd learned to ignore such prohibitions, and I powered up the hill with a wary eye on the blind curves. Soon, I reached a trail in the woods. Carrying the bike, I walked into a complex of temples and to Dragon Well itself, a simple stone circle where an attendant stirred the upwelling, which poured downhill, through the Long Jing plantations, into West Lake itself. People sat around drinking Dragon Well tea made with Dragon Well water, playing cards, smoking, gossiping. I joined them for one hot glass of the brew and then took a long walk along the moss-covered forest floor. After that, I shot down the hill on my bike, gleeful and relaxed.

A friend had recommended a new tea place called Spring Summer Fall Winter, and with those four characters written on a piece of paper, I found myself near the Tea Museum, in a deep grove of bamboo where private tables were nestled in small clearings. The stream was full of orange fish and Dragon Well water; chirping birds hopped from branch to branch; a waiter brought the standard tall glass of withered green leaves. He poured the water in a long stream. It was a nice job of mixing and aerating the leaves, and the water was perfect—just shy of a roiling boil. But I was disappointed not to get the full nodding Phoenix, in which the server decants the water into the glass three times. He only dipped the thermos once.

Nine days and already a tea snob.

Chinese families sat all around, drinking their tea weak, in between bouts of shell-ing sunflower seeds, demolishing oranges, and knocking back Pepsi. Everyone was laughing, as happy as the birds that flitted through the bamboo, awaiting their crumbs. This was tea. I sipped it, slowly. It was bitter, astringent. As usual, I disliked the taste at first. But after a while, I realized that were I a starving monk, this would be just the thing. Finally, I accepted what I really am: one of the overfed literati. A bracing cup of tea was just what I needed. There is no such thing as bitter in Hangzhou. □

Hawaii

(Continued from page 177)

islands' population. To this day, Hawaii is ten times more multiracial, proportionally, than the United States as a whole (24 percent versus 2.4 percent), and half its mar-

riages are cross-racial. Pick up the daily newspaper and you'll see ads—placed by enterprising souls whose very names (Reiko Keifert) seem to be an advertisement for their businesses—urging West to meet East, woo East, and mate with East, producing children who won't know, or care, whether they come from East or West (the Far East, after all, in Hawaii is very much to the west, while the Far West is to the east).

Yet Hawaii is also the place where East and West engaged in some of the bloodiest battles in living memory, and that legacy seems to hover over both the Japanese immigrants who have been here since long before the war and the Japanese tourists who are here, indirectly, because their defeat in war has shown them that there is virtue to the American way. Certainly it's dangerously easy, around Waikiki, to think you've stumbled into a version of Okinawa that just happens to use dollars and fly the Stars and Stripes. As I was walking back from visiting the war memorials along Kalakaua Avenue my first morning in town, I noticed a sign announcing that Yuko and Hiroshi were about to hold their wedding ceremony on the Diamond Lawn at the stately old Moana, home to much of Honolulu's official and gilded history. And although it was still early, troops of Japanese "OLs" (twentysomething "office ladies"), some in I GOT LEI'D T-shirts, were marching behind a flag-waving leader toward a tour bus that would take them to the nearest Gucci store.

Every day, a twenty-eight-page newspaper, the *Japanese Daily Sun*, told me where I could find Japanese cell-phone parlors, copy shops, lawyers, and golf stores in Honolulu; brochures entirely in Japanese lured tired executives from Sapporo toward such homes away from home as the Club Secret, the New D'Amour Club, and Venus Relaxation. Outside the Royal Hawaiian Hotel—on the terrace where Joan Didion had watched California old money sit under the December sun, talking about nieces at Stanford and uncles who'd just played the course at Pebble Beach—there was now only a single chic lady from Tokyo, a copy of *Vogue Nippon* stretched across her legs.

The Japanese feel at home in Waikiki, of course, because their language is spoken here and because so many people resemble their friends and relatives. And, like most of us, they want—when they travel—to find a version of home made somewhat exotic and a version of abroad turned into something consumable and user-friendly. Yet when they run into the Hawaiian-born Japanese who own the stores in Honolulu,

they may find that the latter speak the language of fifty years ago, a rougher, rustic tongue that bears only a passing resemblance to the trendy Japanese idiom of today. Many of the East Asian faces they meet, even in “Japanese” restaurants, come from Korea or China; I counted twenty-six columns of Lees in the phone book (versus only eleven columns of Smiths). And when I checked in to my Japanese-owned hotel, it was to find—unlike in any Japanese hotel I’ve ever seen—no offerings in the minibar, no bulbs in the bedside lamps, and no valets at valet parking.

Some of the signs around Waikiki are clearly aimed at visitors from Japan—like the laminated board at La Cucaracha (the rare restaurant to be named after a cockroach), which reminds “international guests” that it is customary in the United States to reward good service with a tip of fifteen or twenty percent. Yet many other notices seem to be directed at those visitors (from New Zealand, Canada, or even Kansas) who have stumbled into a version of Japan without knowing quite what they’re doing here—like the one at the Saint-Germain Bakery (a Japanese-style interpretation of a French patisserie) reminding customers to pick up their croissants with tongs and not to grab them with their bare paws.

It began to feel as if Hawaii, willy-nilly, had become a test case for what happens when cultures mix and mingle so fully that they lose all sense of what protocols and hierarchies to observe: Next to the bulbless lamp in the New Otani was a copy of *The Teachings of the Buddha*—as well as the Holy Bible and the Book of Mormon.

MY SECOND DAY IN OAHU, I followed a narrow coastal road along some of the most spectacular scenery I’ve ever seen and came to the studio of Masami Teraoka, the wildly original Hiroshima-born artist who became famous for his paintings of classic ukiyo-e Japanese beauties and samurai set beside the Santa Monica Pier or chomping on Big Macs. These days the longtime Hawaii resident is turning in the opposite direction, creating enormous Boschian canvases on which geisha—as well as such protagonists of the day as Monica Lewinsky and misbehaving Catholic priests—are immolated inside a kind of medieval, fire-lit cosmology. Even as Teraoka recalled for me the privations of growing up in Japan during the war, he seemed to be feasting on the cross-cultural fusions of a place his wife calls a suburb of Tokyo.

The day after, driving to the North Shore

to have lunch with Paul Theroux, another defining observer of cultures flirting, I found myself next to a long picnic table with what seemed to be a fairly typical Hawaiian assembly of partly Chinese, partly African American, and largely uncategorizable kids enjoying a casual lunch of avocado burgers and Cokes. “You see who we have next to us?” Paul asked, and I looked up to realize that the party was the extended family of Barack Obama himself, who was now carrying trays for everyone with the poise for which he is rightly famous—and reminding us through his presence that the island of his upbringing is the home of multicultural promise. (Later, Paul asked me where in Japan he could find Haruki Murakami, the super-contemporary novelist whose stories are set in a Japan where all the references are foreign. But neither of us were surprised to discover that he was in fact staying less than an hour away, in a quiet part of Honolulu.)

It was easy, I began to think as the days passed, to laugh at the mishmash of Oahu’s Byodo-in, where twenty-three people are buried behind the temple and not one of the names—Juan M. Sanchez-Garcia, Jamil Ma’ema’e Dubie, and Branden L. Ching among them—sounds remotely Japanese. Really, though, the cemetery seemed to speak for something defining and maybe even redeeming in the new century, where such categories as Japanese and American become less and less important. Hawaii is an ancient tribal crossroads, Somerset Maugham writes at the beginning of his indelible story “Honolulu,” from eighty-six years ago, but it is also a “typical western city.” You go there not for the never-never sashay of an unspoiled Polynesian island, nor even for a piece of America or Japan, but rather for something more complex, a new and energizing kind of exoticism. And “if you have not found the romance you expected,” Maugham tells us, “you have come upon something singularly intriguing.”

TEN DAYS AFTER I LEFT WAIKIKI, I found myself in Kyoto and decided to look in on the original Byodo-in, to see how it compared. A few minutes outside the ancient capital, I ended up at a strikingly worn and simple old building sitting above a pond on a silent winter morning. Its wood was fading and its treasures had been taken off to a nearby museum for safekeeping. Dozens of bodhisattvas could be seen soaring in the skies on its walls, and its tea-green screens might have been here when Lady Murasaki set scenes from *The Tale of Genji* in the vicin-

ity more than a millennium ago.

Yet on the short walk from the local train station to the UNESCO World Heritage Site, I realized that Japan is actually no more “pure” these days than Hawaii is. Here, large cartoon images of big-breasted blonds—on all fours, no less—advertise M’s Alpha Pachinko Parlor, and Kyoto housewives are toning their bodies at aerobics classes across the way in M’s Bld. Sports Gym. The hair salon where kids are having their locks turned chestnut or carrot-red or even straw-yellow is adorned with a poster of Jean-Luc Godard’s *À Bout de Souffle* (on its side). Local cuisine is being spiritedly served up and devoured at Jolly Pasta.

In the temple itself, I read that one of the notable features of Byodo-in is that in ancient times musicians had given concerts in its wings. Chaskis the panpiper, I realized, was not, in fact, violating Japanese tradition, as I had thought, but honoring it in his own distinctively Hawaiian way. There is nowhere more Japanese, I was beginning to believe, than the synthetic modern copy of Byodo-in found in the cemetery mellifluously known as the Valley of the Temples. □

Myanmar

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percent of Myanmar’s citizens never see a tourist.”

Others contend that the increased presence of tourists—particularly visitors from democratic countries—can loosen the government’s psychological grip on the population. “Tourists are not essential to the government’s survival and won’t be even if the numbers grow to a few million per year,” says Thant Myint-U, a Burmese historian and the grandson of former UN secretary general U Thant. “But tourism is the one Burmese industry in which the private sector has free reign. A leap to a few million tourists per year could make a huge difference in ending poverty, not just of individuals but of ideas, imagination, and civilian institutions.”

I had planned my trip as a greatest-hits tour covering Mandalay, Lake Inle, Bagan, and Yangon, with a stint of hill trekking in the Eastern Shan State. Along with my suitcase, I packed trepidation, but not about my personal security (efficient police states being remarkably free of street crime). Would my presence do more harm than good? Despite the talk of boycotts, I had plenty of company. Throughout my trip, I heard American and British voices in hotels and airplanes (though I heard many more French and German accents). In some respects, the country, which blocks international cell phones and censors incoming

and outgoing e-mail, felt less cut off than I had expected. In Yangon, I attended a hip-hop dance class led by the Burmese rapper Lil’ Kaung Myat, whose ambition is to get a shopping mall gig in Singapore, followed by an appearance on Asian MTV. And at Lake Inle, I met a boatbuilder’s wife who rhapsodized about her favorite television show, *Medicinal Master*, a soap opera about a traditional village healer who married the daughter of a rich city businessman. “Every week there is a medical mystery, and they suffer because of their love story,” she told me.

LIKE ALL BURMESE KINGS OF THE past, today’s generals are fervent believers in Theravada Buddhism, and they have been spending millions of dollars on a massive pagoda-building and-restoration campaign. Part of the motivation is to instill a Buddhist, Burmese-speaking national identity in a country composed of 135 different ethnic groups that have mounted various insurgencies since independence from Britain in 1948. Conspicuous donations to temples and monasteries also serve as karma insurance, a way to make up for bad deeds that jeopardize fu-

ture reincarnations. The country now has so many gold-covered pagodas that when approaching Mandalay by air, I had seen the earth literally glitter beneath me.

My hotel was a short trishaw ride from Mandalay Palace, enough time for the driver to whisper an urgent question: Was it true that in a democratic country such as the United States, a poor person could hire a lawyer and seek compensation from a rich person in a hit-and-run car accident? He seemed wistful when I answered yes until I added that a rich person might be able to hire many lawyers and even pay off witnesses. The palace grounds were largely empty of visitors, and the driver told me that in his experience, many travelers exercise their own personal boycott of the site after learning that it was rebuilt using forced labor.

I followed their example and headed instead to the holiest temple in Mandalay, Mahamuni, which contains a golden statue of the Buddha allegedly sculpted from life during his travels in Arakan in 553 B.C. At the donation counter, next to a photograph of Senior General Than Shwe, Myanmar’s top official, I witnessed a man registering an offering consisting of a pair of his aging mother’s sixty-thousand-dollar diamond

earrings—an astonishing gift, considering that the average citizen earns less than two dollars per day. Amid the hum of prayer chants, men of lesser means clambered onto the golden figure to place individual squares of gold leaf, each as thin and fragile as a butterfly wing, on the statue’s knees, elbows, and torso. The thirteen-foot-tall Buddha was disappearing under the weight of all these donations, with only the head showing above encrustations that looked like a gold coral reef. Women sat in their separate prayer niche fingering prayer beads, forbidden from touching the sacred statue.

Mandalay remained the capital for Buddhist study after the British moved their administrative center to Rangoon, and today sixty percent of the country’s 400,000 monks and nuns live in Mandalay and its vicinity. Monasteries and nunneries shelter a social force nearly as large as the military and function as a welfare net, absorbing orphans, the unemployed, and the outcast into their orders; some also run meditation retreats for foreigners. When I asked my guide if I might visit a spiritual center off the tourist trail, I was taken to a nunnery near the old airport, where the government had seized and cleared farmers’ rice paddies and built mansions on the land. We arrived to find a family celebrating the initiation of an eighteen-month-old girl, a novice for a day. They prostrated themselves and paid respect to the abbess, who invited me to share a feast of curries and jaggery cake. The four-story nunnery resembled a modern apartment block and was unfinished, with exposed concrete floors and pillars. Inside, the nuns had created an idealized forest of plastic palm trees and bright-colored Jakata paintings of Buddha’s life story.

“I decided to become a nun when I was thirteen,” said one pink-robed, shaven-headed sister, the sixth of her eight siblings to take her vows. The Buddha himself considered women inferior creatures, capable of observing just 10 of a monk’s 227 precepts—an attitude that persists today. “People refuse to give us alms, and give instead to monks because they believe their blessings are greater,” the nun told me. She said it smiling, with model Buddhist equanimity, but pointed out that monks and nuns all take the same exams of Buddhist knowledge in Myanmar, and that she had scored the highest in her section.

I SIGNED UP TO EXPERIENCE the country’s version of hill tribe trekking, a form of anthropological tourism pioneered in Thailand. The expedition base, Keng Tong, was once notorious as the capital of the Golden Triangle—opium

country between Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos that got its name from the Thai and Laotian practice of paying for Burmese raw opium with solid-gold ingots. The old funnel for mule caravans running goods between China and Thailand, Keng Tong has lately been supplanted by Mong La, on the Chinese border, where autonomous Wa tribesmen, former Communists and headhunters, run a Las Vegas-style frontier town with entertainments banned in Myanmar proper, including casinos and transvestite cabarets. Keng Tong, on the other hand, with its mossy dark-timbered houses surrounding a mountain-flanked lake, retains the atmosphere of old Asia.

My trekking guide (who, like most of the Burmese I met, asked that his name be withheld because of the prohibition against speaking to foreign reporters) picked me up at the airport wearing baggy jeans, a red baseball cap, and, around his wrist, nine pieces of colored string. “I collected each one from a widow,” he said. “They will protect me from the ogress.”

“The King of All Celestial Beings is riding an ogress on his way to marry the frog princess the day after tomorrow,” he continued matter-of-factly. “I had dyed my hair orange to be noticed and get good fortune from the king, but after the astrologer warned us about the ogress, my wife made me dye my hair black.”

We headed to Keng Tong’s morning market to buy picnic provisions. Money changers sat cross-legged on platforms, counting stacks of Chinese yuan notes, Thai baht, and old Indian silver rupees. Vendors sold foods I had never encountered, including dried frogs, scaly dragon fruit, and “ice potatoes,” a black tuber that tasted cool and nutty when I bit into one. We bought parcels of sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves, steamed pork balls, and gingered quail eggs, then drove out of town in an aging Toyota Corolla along the old fourteenth-century pony track, now a tarmac road so rutted that bullock carts and bicyclists actually passed us. A sandy turnoff led past rubber plantations, fields of castor nuts for an as-yet-unrealized government bio-diesel program, and finally to the terraced rice fields of an Eng tribal village. Eng women wore black jackets and skirts, had black-stained teeth (a mark of beauty), and raised black pigs to sell on the black market.

Across a rushing stream sat a monastery, and it soon became clear that my guide had a private agenda—to ask for a piece of protec-

tive string from the monastery leader, a holy novice who had declined to take any of the exams that would advance him on the career path from monk to abbot. The novice was a trim man in his early thirties, with a shaved head, burgundy robes, and tattooed arms. We found him on a dais inside the red-and-gold prayer hall, eating a lunch of herbs and noodles. We peeled three tangerines we had bought in the market and placed them in a silver bowl as an offering. My guide grabbed mine back to neaten it when he saw that I’d missed a few strands of white pith.

“It’s impossible to live by two hundred and twenty-seven rules, but I can try my best to live by ten rules and have compassion,” the novice said when I asked why he didn’t want to rise through the monastic ranks. He had arrived in the village at the age of seventeen, after first seeing it in a dream, and he had converted the residents from animism by an impressive feat: a week of motionless fasting and meditation atop a huge boulder. He had taken in some forty orphans—many of whom were now pre-teen boys, and were just coming back with picks and hoes over their shoulders after a morning of road clearing. Two of the boys prepared lengths of white silk cord for blessing. After saying a prayer and pressing copper squares around the string to make necklaces, the novice acknowledged another reason for keeping his spiritual head down: “The military like to pay respect to abbots. They never come here.”

Wearing our necklaces, we hiked up bamboo-covered slopes to the coriander-scented gardens and rectangular stilt houses of an Akha settlement. Older women wore peaked hats heavy with silver coins, boys played with slingshots, and a girl used a bamboo pole tipped with sticky resin to pluck cicadas off tree branches; she bit off their wings with her teeth and put her snacks, legs kicking, into an embroidered cloth pouch. The guide handed out candy to the children and shampoo packets to the women. I had been enjoying the people and the landscape but suddenly felt awkward and mentioned that some Western travel consultants believe tourists shouldn’t give gifts to local people and corrupt their culture. The guide looked at me as though I were the dreaded ogress. “It is a form of sharing,” he said. “My policy is not to give the villagers money, because then they will stop working.”

That night, back in Keng Tong, a power outage plunged the streets into darkness.

A boatbuilder’s wife rhapsodized about her favorite television show, “Medicinal Master”

Teens on motorbikes cruised the road around the lake, joined by shiny SUVs bearing license plates of the United Wa State Army, a former insurgent group that has made a lucrative peace with the Myanmar army and is reportedly now Southeast Asia's biggest heroin and methamphetamine producer. Keng Tong attracts an interesting assortment of business travelers, judging from a brochure in my hotel room. "Explosives, radio activity materials, firearms and ammunitions, birds and beasts are prohibited from carrying into room," it read. "No narcotics in room, please."

LAKE INLE, MY NEXT STOP, IS THE site of an innovative hotel, the Inle Princess Resort, which belongs to the daughter of a Shan businessman elected to parliament on the National League for Democracy ticket in the 1990 election, the results of which the junta nullified. Managed by two veterans of the Amanresorts chain, it features spa pavilions, a meditation chamber, and forty-six luxury stilt chalets overlooking the lake. The resort donates a portion of its profits to a local orphanage and provides staff with a retirement plan, paid vacations, and merit promotions. I was intrigued to learn that in 2002, Aung San Suu Kyi had visited the Inle Princess and had commended staff for running "a good model for Burma."

Eleven miles long and nearly three thousand feet above sea level, Lake Inle is ringed with mountains. In the midday haze, water, sky, and mountains melted together, the horizon seemed to disappear, and dagger-shaped teak fishing boats appeared to levitate above the water's pearlescent surface. I hired a longboat and crew from my hotel, and we motored past cheroot factories, floating tomato gardens, and waterfowl. The boatman pointed out a duck flock with one male and many females. "I want to come back as a duck," he quipped.

On the western side of the lake, in the village of Indein, I walked into a forest of five hundred small pagodas, crumbling and adorned with broken fragments of dog-sized plaster elephants, phoenixes, and jolly dancers with round, smiling faces. The pinnacles of these monuments were topped with stone rings like those on a toddler's play set; trees grew out of the cracks in the monuments, and some had ancient, rusting chimes that jangled in the breeze. The site, a remnant of the twelfth-century court of King Alaung-sithu, was lovely in its ruined splendor, but up near the main temple and place of worship stood a row of crude cement reproductions. Each was set with a marble plaque thanking tourists—from Singapore, China,

Denmark, and Austria—for their donations. Repairing old monuments, which suffer the annual wear and tear of monsoons, is a way for contemporary worshippers to pay spiritual dues. The profusion of donation plaques—plus the perception that supporting monks is an anti-government gesture—often inspires tourists, not realizing that some of the biggest donors are in fact Burmese military officers, to follow suit.

BAGAN, THE MOST VISITED SITE in Myanmar, is a holy landscape of more than three thousand stupas on the east bank of the Irrawaddy River, a nine-hour ferry ride north of Mandalay. The eleventh-century capital of King Anawrahta, credited with bringing Theravada Buddhism to Myanmar, Bagan had its heyday from the ninth century until the Mongols invaded around A.D. 1280. The vast complex, covering sixteen square miles, includes structures with stepped terraces reminiscent of Mayan pyramids and cruciform buildings with internal flying buttresses predating Gothic cathedrals.

The word *stupa*, meaning "place for relics," derives from the Sanskrit term for hillcock; according to art historians, Bagan's

elaborate stupas evolved from prehistoric grave mounds. And indeed, in the early-morning mist or the crepuscular light after sunset, the place looks haunted, like a cemetery for giants—a notion reinforced by the sight of massive Buddhas squeezed inside some of the larger temples.

People lived and farmed among these ruins until the 1990s, when thousands of them were forcibly relocated, ostensibly to make way for archaeological excavation. Instead, the site has been the subject of an extensive and controversial restoration campaign, one in which contractor profits and the desire to accumulate Buddhist brownie points often take precedence over authenticity.

Modern additions are another of Bagan's threats. At the eastern end of the site, the government commissioned Burmese entrepreneur Tay Za to erect a viewing tower. The result is architecturally out of place not just because of its smooth, cylindrical form but because of its Iraqi ziggurat-style external staircase. Tay Za, the chairman of Air Bagan, is reputedly close to Senior General Than Shwe—so close, in fact, that, according to the BBC, he's licensed to trade arms with Russia (though the tycoon denies it). After Tay Za completed the tower, he was

granted adjacent land, on which he built Bagan's most luxurious hotel, the Aureum Palace, which stands to benefit from the start-up, this year, of Air Bagan flights between Bagan and Siem Reap, the gateway to Angkor Wat.

"They live like Saddam," a resident groused to me of the military caste and its cronies, as we ate stewed river prawns in a garden scented with frangipani and burning mosquito coils. "Their life is about staying in power, and they care only about their own families." This man had traveled abroad and was a fan of CNN. "I want Larry King to come to Myanmar," he suddenly burst out. "The problem with Myanmar is that we have no one to speak for us. I want Larry King to speak for us, and I will even pay for his hotel and plane ticket."

CALLED RANGOON BY THE British and rechristened Yangon in 1989, the former capital of Myanmar sits on a main tributary of the Irrawaddy, just at the point where the river widens before flowing into the Andaman Sea. It is the main transportation link for interior towns and regions and was among Asia's busiest ports until 1962, when General Ne Win launched his disastrous Burmese Road to Socialism policy and closed the door on the outside world. Today, although the current regime has opened the economy, Yangon receives just one or two container ships per month, if that. The lack of sea trade is a result of Western sanctions and reflects Myanmar's continued isolation from international markets.

In 2005, reportedly at a precise time deemed auspicious by astrologers, Senior General Than Shwe relocated Myanmar's capital to Naypyidaw, a purpose-built city two hundred miles to the north. The move made the military secure against naval invasion (U.S. aggression in Iraq reportedly worries Myanmar's leaders) and put it closer to remaining ethnic insurgencies in the Shan, Kayeh, and Karen states. Yangon's moldering Victorian buildings, a vestige of British colonial rule, have been emptied of government ministries. (A rumor circulating at the time of my visit posited that the regime had vacated Yangon in order to lease prime riverfront real estate to Chinese entrepreneurs seeking to develop a new port to serve China's landlocked Yunnan Province.)

I was told that Senior General Than Shwe had also wanted to relocate Yangon's Shwedagon Pagoda, the holiest place in the country, but had changed his mind at the last minute. On a hill overlooking the city, Shwedagon contains a shrine housing four of the Buddha's hairs and draws as many as forty thousand worshippers daily to medi-

tate and circumambulate the three-hundred-foot-tall central stupa, which is coated with tons of gold and topped by a seventy-six-carat diamond.

The guide I hired in Yangon warned me to stay on guard here: Government spies, he said, sometimes dress as monks and engage foreigners in conversation and eavesdrop on Burmese. Others had told me that it was the guides themselves who were instructed to sow disinformation. The net of suspicion and paranoia—into which both Burmese and visitors are drawn—rendered the sight of men and women meditating before Buddha statues all the more poignant, as if the smiling stone figures are the only trustworthy confidants. Still, the day I visited was an occasion for celebration. Three boy novices had come here, with their families, dressed in the costume of Buddha before his enlightenment: pink silk sarongs, gold-sequined crowns, garlands of jasmine and imitation rubies; their cheeks were dotted with thanaka wood paste, their lips touched with pink lipstick. I stayed past sunset, watching the sky turn from turquoise to a black pierced by stars and the spotlighted stupa's golden glow.

When I finally came down from the sacred hill at around nine o'clock, Yangon's streets were eerily quiet. Many were darkened because of power cuts, and police had closed University Road, where Aung San Suu Kyi's house is, with their nightly roadblock. To take people's minds off politics, the generals have allowed the spread of Western-style entertainment, including malls, music clubs, and golf tournaments. But amid domestic fuel shortages and soaring inflation (in August, the regime doubled diesel prices), few Burmese can benefit from the new amenities. Deteriorating living conditions have sparked a series of demonstrations this past year, including one of the largest in recent history, in August, when several hundred protesters, mostly women, marched through the streets of Yangon before being dispersed by pro-government gun squads.

THE DAY I LEFT MYANMAR, I stopped on the way to the airport in Yangon at a compound where three white elephants, captured in the Rakhine State, were being kept as symbols of auspiciousness. They had been left behind when the capital moved north, and were chained so tightly to their wooden scratching posts that they could move just half a step in any direction. The elephants had been taken from the forest on the orders of former prime minister and intelligence chief Khin Nyunt, a protégé of General Ne Win's who was relieved of his duties by Senior General Than Shwe in an internal coup in

2004. Their keepers were waiting to see if they would have to move the elephants to Naypyidaw. Foreign diplomats were also waiting to see if they would be summoned to live in the new capital. All of Myanmar, in fact, was waiting—to see whether Aung San Suu Kyi would be released from house arrest when her term was up in May (she was not), and to hear updates on the health of the two most powerful generals, both in their seventies and reportedly suffering from serious maladies.

"Things will change, we just don't know how or when," Lu Maw had told me hopefully back in Mandalay, reflecting a combination of courage, perseverance, and, amazingly, good humor that to me, more than rubies, teak, or gas, seem Myanmar's key assets. "We must be patient. Just look at what happened in the Soviet Union." □

Asian Beaches

(Continued from page 163)

< Best Beaches Overall >

INDIA

Beach No. 7, Havelock Island

Two hours by air from Calcutta or Chennai, followed by an hour's boat ride and a 30-minute drive along rutted tracks, Beach No. 7 on Havelock Island is one of 572 Andaman and Nicobar islands strung out like baroque pearls along the western edge of the Andaman Sea. Closer to Thailand but belonging to India, these volcanic formations welcome fewer than 10,000 visitors a year (mostly to Havelock, one of only a few Andaman Islands that permit tourism; the Nicobars are entirely off-limits). The islands gained notoriety as a World War II penal colony, but far more intriguing today are the six aboriginal tribes that have called them home since prehistoric times. Amateur anthropologists take note: Primitive but effective arrows and spears greet those who attempt contact. Far better to spend sultry days from November through May meandering along this talcum-white mile-and-a-quarter stretch (also known as Radhanagar Beach), where swaying palms reach out from the dense rain forest to cast shadows on the translucent sand-bottom sea. Hole up at **Barefoot at Havelock**, an environmentally sensitive beachfront resort with 18 conical thatched-roof cottages, a yoga sala, and a pillow-strewn bar serving sundowners. Fifteen nearby dive sites are filled with lionfish, Napoleon wrasses, and triggerfish, but nothing beats swimming alongside Rajan, the hotel's tusked male elephant (91-319-228-2151; barefootindia.com; doubles, \$95–\$140).

ASIAN BEACHES

INDONESIA

Nihiwatu Beach, Sumba Island

Claude and Petra Graves sailed extensively around the Philippines and Indonesia before settling on this pristine mile-and-a-half-long strand surrounded by lush pandani and rice terraces. On it they built **Nihiwatu**, their ten-bungalow eco-retreat overlooking the Indian Ocean, 250 miles east of Bali (see *Condé Nast Traveler's* twelfth annual "Green List," September 2006). First mentioned in the sixteenth century by Antonio Pigafetta, a traveling companion of Magellan's, and later called Sandalwood in reference to its once-rich forests, Sumba is inhabited by a close-knit ancient people who believe that they are descendants of the sun and the moon. After counting three shooting stars on my first night, who am I to disagree? The next morning, I surveyed the sea's serene, glassy surface and returned hours later to a cacophonous scene that had surfers paddling into the now undulating waters; see "Best Beaches for Sports," below (62-361-757-149; nihiwatu.com; doubles, \$390, all-inclusive).

MALDIVES

Baa, North Ari, and North Malé Atolls

Luxury lovers are by no means the first guests to discover these 1,190 coral islands strung along the equator: Roman and Chinese coins unearthed in the 1980s by Norwegian anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl date the earliest known arrivals to more than 2,000 years ago. These days, visitors island-hop by speedboat and ultra-efficient air taxi, but for those who want it all on a single island, **One&Only Reethi Rah's** 109 acres in the North Malé Atoll are lushly endowed with 12 intimate lagoons and 16,000 coconut trees (906-664-8800; oneandonlyresorts.com; doubles, \$920–\$1,470). Some of the Maldives' most colorful marine creatures swim in the waters around Fesdu Island in the North Ari Atoll, home to the photogenic **W Retreat & Spa**. A full spectrum of live coral sways around the spa's overwater treatment pavilions, and glass-hulled kayaks provide the best vantage for viewing angelfish and Oriental sweetlips (960-666-2222; whotels.com; doubles, \$710–\$910). Architect Ismail Murad flew back and forth over the **Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru**, a former coconut plantation on Baa Atoll, to identify the optimal spot for Blu, the resort's whitewashed, sand-floored Italian café. It has open-air views of the island's romantic sandbank, whose granules are so white that sunglasses are a must (960-660-0888; fourseasons.com; doubles, \$800–\$1,200).

THAILAND

Laem Tong Bay, Koh Phi Phi

Leonardo DiCaprio's *The Beach* glorified the quest for Thailand's supreme seashore, but I for one was waiting for someplace with the thread count I needed to tuck in for the night. As we cruised into Laem Tong Bay, on Phi Phi's less developed northeast coast, my patience was rewarded with flawless water teeming with tropical fish. As we stepped off the deck, my feet sank into a powdery softness unlike anything they'd previously experienced. Gilding this particular lily is **Zeavola**: 48 roomy villas, kitted out by Bangkok's Beyond Living with textiles and handpainted wall murals that update the motifs of old Siam, and more than a thousand flowering trees among the cove's rich vegetation (66-75-627-024; zeavola.com; suites, \$325–\$650).

< Best Beach Hotels >

CAMBODIA

Knai Bang Chatt, Kep

In the too-short time between France's departure as colonial overlord in the 1950s and the Khmer Rouge takeover in the seventies, wealthy industrialists basked in the relative calm among the grand mansions and casinos of Sihanoukville and other coastal towns. Helping to make *la côte* Cambodia cool again are **Knai Bang Chatt's** 11 air-conditioned rooms spread among three Art Deco villas on the Gulf of Thailand in Kep, three hours south of Phnom Penh. Inside, minimalist-chic interiors frame indigo views. Outside, a roof deck with a single sprawling couch is ideal for stargazing, cushioned canopied daybeds built for two occupy the narrow beach, and a fishing boat facilitates snorkeling excursions to the immaculate waters around little-visited Rabbit Island (855-1287-9486; www.knaibangchatt.com; doubles, \$350).

MALDIVES

Huvafen Fushi, North Malé Atoll

Set at the end of a 650-foot-long jetty, **Huvafen Fushi's** two 3,500-square-foot ocean pavilions command expansive views yet remain private enough for skinny-dipping in the fiber-optic-lit swimming pools or in the temperate Indian Ocean among friendly stingrays. Operating the high-tech indoor gadgetry here takes some practice, but a dedicated *thakuru*, or butler, is on hand at any hour to fill the oceanfront bathtub, deliver the day's catch, or organize a spur-of-the-moment deep-sea dive (an additional 41 waterfront bungalows are equally high-tech but share butlers). Full-sized fridges stocked with

ASIAN BEACHES

Veuve Clicquot and Lindt chocolates tide guests over between the organic dishes at the overwater Raw and the Indian meals served on tables in the sand at the Cardamom Lounge (960-664-4222; huvafenfushi.com; ocean pavilions, \$4,300).

THAILAND

Amanpuri, Phuket

While staying at the Pansea (now the Chedi Phuket), Amanresorts' founder Adrian Zecha decided to carve out his own corner of Pansea Beach, a patch of powdery sand fronting a dense palm cove along Phuket's northern shores. From **Amanpuri's** 40 minimalist guest rooms grew Amanresorts, a brand that many consider the standard-bearer of Asian luxury-hotel design and service. Pavilions 103 and 105 afford the best views, a fact known to regulars, who secure them more than a year in advance. Others make do with spacious hillside compounds that include private sun decks and Thai antiques. Descend the imposing stone staircase to Amanpuri's intimate beach club, where a well-stocked bar carries fine cigars, while a classic black-bottom pool allows guests to cool off without braving the surf. Another flight of steps delivers you to ultra-padded sun loungers set into the sand. Those in need of more serious unwinding should head to the spa for the Puri Special: Thai yoga moves, herbal steam, and a

deep-tissue massage (66-7632-4333; amanresorts.com; pavilions, \$525–\$1,275).

VIETNAM

Nam Hai, China Beach

Nam Hai's 40 South China Sea-facing Pool Villas are strung along a half-mile sweep of champagne-colored sand between two of Vietnam's top tourist draws: Danang and Hoi An. Sloping roofs lend these newly constructed edifices a traditional air. Inside, intricately carved Oriental screens and handmade lacquer sinks and bathtubs keep company with an espresso machine, a sophisticated sound system, and crisp Irish linens; socially conscious sybarites will be glad to know that most of the other sewn items are purchased from a local charity established to employ abused women. Guests in an additional 60 one-bedroom villas have to make do without a butler. The hotel can arrange trips to the ancient city of Hue, three hours away by car, but a leisurely stroll down the beach to one of the eight overwater spa pavilions makes for its own memorable excursion (84-510-940-000; ghmhoteles.com; Pool Villas, \$850–\$2,300).

< Best Beach Parties >

INDONESIA

Ku De Ta, Bali

Two thousand-plus fabulously frocked people turn out for each of the year's five

< Best Beach Eats >

CHINA

One-Thirtyone, Hong Kong

With a mere four tables, this romantic dining room inside a Sino-Portuguese mansion on Three Fathoms Cove in Hong Kong's pastoral New Territories has exposed beams, French doors, and fine European cuisine (131 Tseng Tau Village Rd.; 852-2791-2684; prix fixe, \$66–\$105).

INDONESIA

La Lucciola, Bali

Seriously strong Toraja coffee and exotic hotcakes lure Bali's hard-partying brunch lovers to this open-air bamboo-and-rattan house set back from Seminyak Beach, behind soaring palm trees and an elegantly manicured lawn (Jalan Oberoi; 62-361-730-838; entrées, \$13–\$20).

MALAYSIA

Eden Seafood Village, Penang

Food snobs overlook the thousand-seat dining room, glaring seafood tanks, and nightly

Malay cultural show, concentrating instead on lobster grilled in garlic butter, crab in spicy black-pepper sauce, generous platters of tender tiger prawns, and views of Ferringhi Beach (69-A Jalan Batu Ferringhi; 604-881-1236; set menus, \$10–\$86).

MALDIVES

Deep End, Emboodhu Finolhu Island

Blame chef Sandip Narang if that bikini feels too tight after you dine on his sublime foie gras crème brûlée, luscious char-grilled rock lobster in chardonnay-infused caviar beurre blanc, and decadent ricotta cheesecake served on a macadamia nut brownie with chocolate-chili ice cream (Taj Exotica Resort & Spa; 960-664-2200; entrées, \$38–\$115).

THAILAND

Kruvit Raft Seafood, Phuket

Board a traditional longboat at Laem Hin Pier for a five-minute zoom to this floating maze of wooden planks surrounded by nets lying in wait for the lobsters, prawns, and soft-shell crabs that are the specialty of this overwater eatery run by Muslim sea gypsies (66-89-873-7398; prices not available at press time).

ASIAN BEACHES

biggest events—held on consecutive Saturday nights starting in late July—at **Ku De Ta**, a bar and restaurant on Seminyak Beach. So it's no surprise that this open-air venue takes security as seriously as an embassy: On the night I visited, plainclothes officers mingled with the guests, and the manager mentioned a recent consultation with Australian antiterrorism experts. But as children and dogs gamboled about, the crowd seemed blissfully unaware of anything save their icy rainbow-colored cocktails and the fiery sun dipping into the dark-as-night Indian Ocean. Surfers straggled in, saying they could hear the music even over the day's impressive swells, and the dinner crowd ordered some of Bali's most delicious dishes, including seared foie gras and tea-smoked barramundi. While the ice here melts in "less than three seconds," according to the bartender, visiting celebrity DJs and live performances by the likes of Cirque du Soleil and Erykah Badu keep the party going considerably longer (9 Jalan Laksmana; 62-361-736-969; kudeta.net; entrées, \$16–\$31).

SINGAPORE

Sentosa Island

Preconceived notions of stuffy Singapore dissipate like the day's heat on this theme park–like pleasure island easily accessible by taxi or cable car. Sure, chewing gum is banned, but at the **Café del Mar**, waitresses in microscopic bikinis deliver sweet lime mojitos to beachfront daybeds crammed with refugees from the high-powered business district. On weekends, the party runs around the clock, although my bartender with multiple body piercings readily admitted that the scene never escalates into a full-throttle rave: "This is still Singapore," she quipped (40 Siloso Beach Walk; 65-6235-1296; cafedelmar.com.sg). Late in the morning, an entirely different vibe—more Gidget than Gucci—kicks in at **KM8**, a shabby-chic whitewashed beach shack where arriving on a bike or with dogs is de rigueur. Volleyball lures some, while others nurse hangovers under beach umbrellas fashioned from dried palm fronds (120 Tanjong Beach Walk; 65-6274-2288; km8.com.sg).

SRI LANKA

Wijaya Beach

It's been dubbed Chelsea East by the British press, and a contingent of South Kensington exiles do indeed reside in Galle, a ten-minute *tuk-tuk* ride away. But this American visitor can testify to the relaxed, unstuffy vibe at the semiregular beach parties thrown here on Sri Lanka's southern

sands. Rumor has it that the first tsunami-recovery funds raised by these expats went to rebuild **Wijaya Beach Cottage**, the fish shack that serves as their unofficial headquarters (near the 124-kilometer highway marker, in Dalawella; 94-91-228-3610; seafood platter, \$9). And who can blame them for wanting to resurrect the family-owned kitchen, which serves cold beer and heaping platters of fresh-caught seafood around the clock? School holidays turn these shores into a multigenerational all-day picnic. After sundown, speakers drown out the surf and everyone is welcome to bump bottoms, regardless of color, creed, or old-boy affiliation. Party hearty, then sleep in style among the rice terraces three miles inland at the five-room **Kahanda Kanda** (94-91-223-6499; kahandakanda.com; suites, \$190–\$200).

THAILAND

Amanpuri, Phuket

Old-timers still grieve for the Christmas-time parties thrown here in the nineties, when fashion jet-setters like Kenzo and Calvin Klein flew in for bling-filled bashes inside the 30 legendary villas at **Amanpuri**, Amanresorts' original Phuket property, which overlooks Pansea Beach. But after a few low-key seasons (by these stellar standards, anyway), a new generation of boldface names have planted their manicured feet in this golden sand. The gossip at last year's holiday festivities was the non-nuptials of Kate Moss, who, rather than running off with Babyshambles front man Pete Doherty (as rumor had it), was actually quaffing champagne around the property's private pools with Shanghai Tang founder David Tang and members of the British royal family (66-7632-4333; amanresorts.com; doubles, \$525–\$1,275).

< Best Beach Scenery >

CHINA

The Great Wall, Lao Long Tou

Built to repel invading Mongol and Turkic tribes, the Great Wall was in fact regularly breached. Today, this 4,000-mile-long military folly has been recast as a symbol of China's rich history. Yet at Lao Long Tou ("Old Dragon's Head"), outside the garrison town of Shanhaiguan, this awesome endeavor submissively crumbled into the cloudy Bohai Gulf. For generations, locals looted the remains, but 15 years ago the government re-created the wall's final 46-foot-high half-mile. Stairs lead down to a narrow pebble-strewn beach where Chinese families pose for photos and search for wall-shard souvenirs. In tribute to the

ASIAN BEACHES

wall's human cost, the rebuilt Temple to the Sea Goddess rises majestically above the shore on "Looking for Husband Rock." The shrine, desecrated by Red Guards and restored after Mao's death, honors the probably mythical Meng Jiangnu as the embodiment of countless Chinese women who lost husbands to sequential dynasties' insatiable need to fortify. According to folklore, the wall here buckled under the weight of her tears. One night should suffice at **Jiguan Zhaodaisuo**, a courtyard house turned basic guest accommodations (17 Dong Si Tiao Hutong; 86-335-505-1938; doubles, \$20–\$30).

INDONESIA

Komodo dragons, Komodo National Park

About 1,500 Komodo dragons roam Rinca, one of three main islands that constitute Komodo National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Indonesia's Flores Sea. I arrived during these antediluvian creatures' mating season, when males use their tongues to flirt as well as to smell, which I thought might explain the incessant darting forked tongue advancing in my direction. In the morning (the best time of day to see these living anachronisms, which can grow to ten feet in length), a park ranger led me along Komodo Island's desiccated trails, enthusiastically pointing out wild boar, macaque monkeys, and Timor deer (which he called the dragons' favorite dish)—as five more dragons gingerly crossed our path. We broke for lunch at Pink Beach, one of the park's most popular dive sites. Snorkeling among giant trevallies, turtles, and vibrant coral lifted my spirits, as did one final interlude with

a female I nicknamed the Dragon Queen, who paraded past us near Komodo pier with her scaly yellow head held high. Only when my camera battery died did I climb back aboard the lavishly appointed **Ikan Gurami**, an 89-foot cargo boat turned two-stateroom luxury cruiser, paneled in teak and manned by a crew of seven (from May through October, Komodo Park cruises can be booked through Amanresorts: 65-6887-3337; amanresorts.com; seven-night cruise, \$6,975 per person).

Tanah Lot Temple, Bali

Family temples, rice temples, royal temples, water temples, and countless other shrines dot this fabled isle, but none cast a more dramatic presence than this sixteenth-century Hindu sanctuary built on a rock outcrop off Bali's southern coast. A photographer's dream, the Temple of the Earth in the Sea strikes its most monumental pose at sunset, when its multilevel angular outline slices through the chiaroscuro sky. In anticipation, I headed to the adjacent hot springs to undergo *melukat*, a karma-cleansing ceremony on the sparkling volcanic sand. This rite of passage is typically performed to rebalance the spirit after an accident or in preparation for a life-changing event such as marriage. As I entered the eerily somber water, a bearded

Hindu priest asked permission from the ocean god to cleanse me. Following a meal of ambrosial grilled chicken, fresh fruit, and addictive sweet rice cakes, I was returned to the secular realm with a white string around my right wrist, signifying my new inner harmony—which persisted until I stumbled upon Tanah Lot's resident sea snake. I escaped by bicycle into the nearby rice fields of Canggu, where each of **Tamu Seseh's** four private villas comes with a full kitchen (62-361-742-7810; tamuseseh.com; villas, \$160–\$260).

JAPAN

Hot-sand baths, Kyushu Island

At Kyushu's extreme southern tip are its renowned *sunamushi onsen*—steamy, sulfurous sand baths generated by underground hot springs. *Suna-buro*, or sand bathing, is a daily ritual for locals, especially the elderly, who don kimonos and lie in a pit while a female attendant show-



Map by Karin Faurek

els in sand up to their necks. Don't save the roughly five-dollar fee by attempting to dig yourself a hole: Temperatures vary dramatically, and amateurs risk digging their own graves. Daily repetition of this ritual is believed to purify the blood as the body sweats out toxins, but locals swear these body burials also refresh the soul. The best time to experience this otherworldly scene of steam swirling around heads poking out of the shimmering ebony landscape is late afternoon, when the sun streaks pink and yellow behind the nearby volcanic island of Sakurajima. Overnight at the **Ibusuku Hakusuikan** ryokan, where then prime minister Junichiro Koizumi, seeking to clear political bad blood, hosted his South Korean counterpart in 2004 (81-993-22-3131; hakusuikan.co.jp/en; doubles, \$127-\$300).

< Best Beach Spas >

INDONESIA

Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay

"You are intensely present," said Dutch masseuse Elisa Senese after an hour of administering water therapy in the **Four Seasons Resort Bali's** oceanfront pool, which overlooks a four-mile caramel crescent on the southern coast. What would be a compliment back at the office here was a mild rebuke, as the *watsu*-trained healer encouraged me to let go of the stress inherent in a transcontinental life. I heard Jimbaran Bay's gentle churn when my ears broke the surface as Senese took me through underwater spinestretches that painlessly released tension. More aquatic pleasures, from private sea-facing plunge pools to outdoor showers and soaking tubs, awaited back at the 147 thatched-roof villas sprinkled along the southern slope of Jimbaran Bay, all with sea views, Balinese textiles, and generous daybeds (62-361-701-010; fourseasons.com; doubles, \$630-\$2,700; one-hour water massage, \$110).

MALAYSIA

Four Seasons Resort, Langkawi

The choice between the amenities of a full-service spa and the convenience of an in-room treatment is rendered moot at the **Four Seasons Resort's** 2,369-square-foot beach villas, all 20 of which front the Andaman Sea. As I plunged into my private pool, the masseuse readied the massage room. Moving from bottom to top, this Balinese master worked her strong hands into my feet to unlock travel tensions at the root. Like all therapists here, she is trained in Reiki, which allows her to channel balanc-

ing energy I could actually feel as she tenderly cradled my head or placed both palms between my breastbone and stomach to calm my core. At this 91-room resort, by far Langkawi's finest accommodations, even the standard guest pavilions have been designed for indulgence by top Thai architect Lek Bunnag, who nestled the spa's six treatment spaces around dramatic granite cliffs (60-4-950-8888; fourseasons.com; doubles, \$495-\$540; beach villas, \$1,500; massages, \$96-\$182).

THAILAND

Kamalaya, Koh Samui

At this open-air pavilion built into the rocky cliffs above Koh Samui's Laem Set Beach, eight simple mattresses clad in high-thread-count cotton are strategically angled to soak up glistening Gulf of Thailand views. Each time **Kamalaya's** Thai masseuse wrapped her deceptively svelte arms around mine to bend my coach-class-ravaged back into the contortion known as cobra, my eyes feasted on the azure expanse as if imbibing a curative tonic. Afterward, I floated back to one of 60 guest rooms set amid the towering coconut palms and filled with Himalayan treasures by the art-dealer owner. Thanks to American architect Robert Powell's deliberate design, I never lost sight of the sea, except when climbing back up the hillside for another treatment at the ten-room Wellness Sanctuary, which administers everything from flower remedies

Credits

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to a full Western medical checkup (66-77-429-800; kamalaya.com; doubles, \$217–\$345; Thai massage, \$53–\$73).

The Sarojin, Khao Lak

Few experiences can top a sunset walk along Khao Lak Beach's nearly seven miles of latte-colored sand; among them is the Pathways spa's Faa Fairt massage, still a favorite of mine after two years and dozens of exotic treatments around the globe. I practically skipped across the elevated wooden walkway that snakes through this 56-room resort. **The Sarojin**—which has minimalist yet entirely comfortable accommodations and gourmet French and Thai cuisine—has led local efforts to put Khao Lak back on the holiday map (it was one of the beach communities hardest hit by the 2004 tsunami). While a great rub needs no special ambience, a sublime location can significantly enhance the experience. These four open-air suites set along a natural klong, or canal, are protected from the Andaman Sea by high dunes yet are close enough that you can hear the waves washing over the coral. For 90 minutes, I enjoyed the indulgence of two women stroking my naked limbs with Swiss synchronicity (66-

76-427-900; sarojin.com; doubles, \$365–\$541; Faa Fairt massage, \$150).

< Best Beaches for Sports >

INDONESIA

Diving, Banda Sea

What nineteenth-century British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace observed in the biodiverse waters off present-day Indonesia prompted peer Charles Darwin to publish his theory of evolution. Darwin may have stolen history's spotlight, but serious divers seek out the Wallace Line (an ecotone in the waters between Bali and Lombok) and the Makassar Strait, where two distinct Asian and Australasian ecosystems overlap. Former Ambon Island dive-shop owner Jason Friedman suggested I submerge myself in the Banda Sea, since fish migrate down the Marianas Trench seeking food along these rich coral reefs. "It's a marine superhighway," he told me by e-mail from his current post as manager of the Four Seasons' elephant camp in Thailand's Golden Triangle. There's even a beach bonus: Parrot fish and other reef-eating marine life digest the coral and then flush out the powdery white granules that I found along Friedman's favorite Asian beaches—those that ring the Tanimbar Islands, between Timor and New Guinea. Dive the Banda Sea in style aboard the **Silolona**, a thoroughly luxurious five-suite interpretation of the indigenous ships that have transported rice and spices through the surrounding waters for centuries (62-361-287-326; silolona.com; from \$12,000 per day).

Surfing, Sumba Island

Lethal for beginners, the left-breaking waves off the ten-bungalow eco-retreat **Nihiwatu** (see "Best Beaches Overall") are legendary for serious surfers, who arrive by air from Bali with three boards in tow. "It's a drag not to have a fourth," former pro surfer Jeff Novak lamented as our Trigana Air flight from Bali bounced through the clouds (Bali's Denpasar airport levies considerable fees for travelers with more than three boards, to discourage illegal imports). Novak was surfing well-known Bali swells Dreamland and Uluwatu when surfer Web sites like wetsand.com lured him to Sumba's less-crowded waters. Only nine surfers at a time are allowed at Nihiwatu, which keeps the island's southwest coast clear for wave warriors like those I heard praising "the fastest curls short of the Pipeline," referring to Oahu's iconic break (62-361-757-149; nihiwatu.com; doubles, \$390, all-inclusive).

MALDIVES

Sailing, North Ari Atoll

"It's all about the dhoni," said my friend Katerina Katopis of her recent visit to **Dhoni Mighili**, a two-acre islet cum resort in the Maldives' North Ari Atoll. The unique selling point of the rustic-chic property, which is limited to 12 adults at a time, is that each of its six modest villas comes with a 65-foot sailboat similar to the wooden dhonis used by the ancient Phoenicians. Handcrafted of balau wood, Dhoni Mighili's interpretations have been updated with cushy comforts like daybeds on deck and Frette sheets in the stateroom down below, not to mention a crew of three. Traveling skippers may miss the hard work of actually keeping the boat afloat, but sybarites like me can sunbathe between scuba dives among the kaleidoscopic coral and soldierfish, turtles, and whale sharks. We disembarked at one postcard-perfect deserted isle after another for fresh-caught picnic lunches of grilled tuna and chili lobster (960-666-0751; dhoni mighili.com; doubles, \$2,200–\$2,600, all-inclusive).

Surfing, North Malé Atoll

These Indian Ocean atolls are fast becoming known as some of the world's most indulgent surfing destinations, with high-performance waves and water temperatures of 80 to 86 degrees year-round. Swapping bespoke business suits for neoprene, stressed-out executives catch the curl aboard the 128-foot, triple-deck **Four Seasons Explorer**. Australia's Tropicsurf operates surf clinics for all levels aboard the luxury catamaran, which accommodates up to 22 guests but recommends that novices complete a beginner's course at the Four Seasons Kuda Hura, in the North Malé Atoll. For three days (four- and seven-day cruises are also options), we sailed, as promised, between "secluded locations no other surfers know about, where guests can live out their surfing fantasies." Then came my favorite part: a pampering welcome back from the Kuda Hura's smiling staff, arms outstretched to wrap us in bathrobes seemingly sewn of cloud fluff (960-664-4888; fourseasons.com; one night, \$679–\$784 per person).

PHILIPPINES

Diving, Bacuit Bay

Spend time between the sheets at El Nido Resorts' **Miniloc Island Resort** or **Lagen Island Resort** (see "Best Beaches Overall"), then hit the water, where prehistoric limestone rocks jut through green-tinged Bacuit Bay. The ancient monoliths here recall Phuket's Phang Na and Vietnam's Halong Bay, and gentle currents allow div-

ers to float effortlessly among them. While the fish may not be the most exotic, the sea teems with life—"not schools but universities" was my dive instructor's standard but astute observation. Stingrays swim among clown fish, snappers, and three-foot-long groupers, and I was assured that encounters with barracudas and with Napoleon wrasses up to six feet long greet more daring divers farther offshore (63-2-894-5644; elnidoresorts.com; doubles, \$400-\$640, all-inclusive; for more information, see *Condé Nast Traveler's* twelfth annual "Green List," September 2006). □

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VOLUME 42, NO. 10, *CONDÉ NAST TRAVELER* (ISSN 0893-9683) is published monthly by the Condé Nast Publications, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: The Condé Nast Building, 4 Times Square, New York, New York 10036. S.I. Newhouse, Jr., Chairman; Charles H. Townsend, President/CEO; John W. Bellando, Executive Vice President/COO; Jill Bright, Executive Vice President/Human Resources; Debi Chirichella Sabino, Senior Vice President/CFO. Periodicals postage paid at New York, New York, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001. Canada post: Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to Box 874, Station Main, Markham, Ontario L3P8L4.

POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO *CONDÉ NAST TRAVELER*, Box 37629, Boone, Iowa 50037-0629. FOR SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADDRESS CHANGES, ADJUSTMENTS, OR BACK ISSUE INQUIRIES: Please write to *CONDÉ NAST TRAVELER*, Box 37629, Boone, Iowa 50037-0629, call 800-777-0700, or e-mail subscriptions@cntraveler.com. Amoco Torch Club members write to Amoco Torch Club, Box 9014, Des Moines, Iowa 50306. Please give both new and old address as printed on most recent label. First copy of new subscription will be mailed within eight weeks of receipt of order. Address all editorial, business, and production correspondence to *CONDÉ NAST TRAVELER*, 4 Times Square, New York, New York 10036. For permissions and reprint requests, please call 212-630-5656 or fax requests to 212-630-5883. Visit us online at www.cntraveler.com. To subscribe to other Condé Nast magazines on the World Wide Web, visit www.condenet.com. Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services which we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, please advise us at Box 37629, Boone, Iowa 50037-0629 or call 800-777-0700.

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