



ELEMENTS OF ASIA

With adrenaline-pumping adventures set in mind-blowing locations, these thrilling journeys are well beyond your usual tours. So leave your inhibitions behind and discover the wild side of the world – and yours too – as you become one with the elements.

WORDS BY TIM RUSSELL

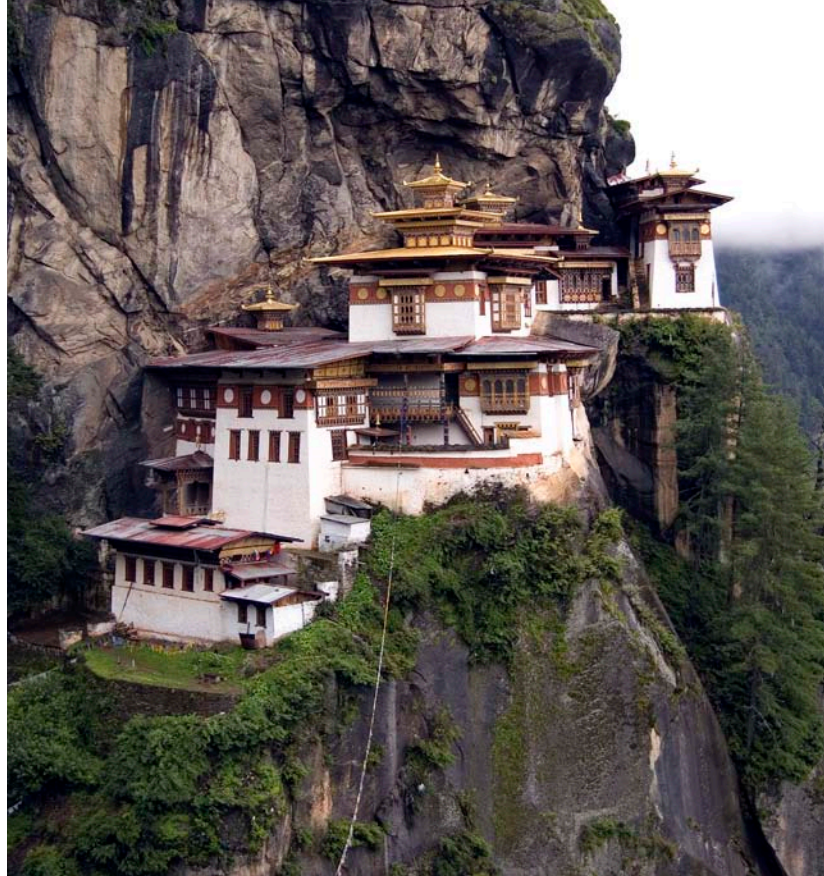
EARTH

The landlocked Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is one of Asia's most mysterious and quirky destinations, and one that is fully determined to hang on to its unique character – progress is measured in Gross National Happiness rather than GDP; there's an annual limit on the number of tourist visitors; and the locals wear national dress out of habit rather than for show. It's a truly charming country.

You can, of course, view Bhutan's spectacular scenery and welcoming towns from the comfort of a private car, but to truly immerse yourself in the country's landscapes, there's no better way than to strap on your walking boots and get trekking. Ultra-luxe tour operator **Remote Lands** makes this easy with a wide range of programmes, including the six-day Druk Path Trek.

On the one hand, it's pretty tough going – you'll be trekking up to 11 mi a day at altitudes reaching 12,700 ft – so you'll need to be physically fit. But all that effort is well worth it when you consider the sights that lie in store. You'll see Bhutan's iconic Taktsang Monastery, the famous "Tiger's Nest" perched seemingly precariously on a cliffside 3,000 ft up and 10,000 ft above sea level, reached only via an exhilarating half-day hike through scenic pine forests. Its legend dates back to 747 AD, when Guru Rinpoche, the historical founder of Tibetan Buddhism, is claimed to have arrived at the site on the back of a tiger.

Other sites that you'll have the chance to explore include the Jili Dzong fortress, a regular resting spot for weary travellers situated 10,300 ft above sea level; and the Motithang Takin Preserve, home to Bhutan's rare national animal, from which the name of the place was derived.



You'll finish off in the friendly capital Thimphu, before heading to Paro Airport, making it easy to extend your trip by visiting connecting countries such as India or Thailand.

STAY

And just because you're trekking doesn't mean you'll miss out on creature comforts. Remote Lands partners with the most luxurious accommodation available in Bhutan – you'll be staying in a mix of uber-luxe **Amankora** or **UMA Resorts** and luxury camps, where a team of porters and cooks will take care of your every whim and you'll awaken to stunning Himalayan views. You may even be sharing your camp with local yak herders, who will give you a unique insight into rural Bhutanese life and traditions.

Amanresorts have exclusive Amankora lodges throughout Bhutan, all located in scenic surroundings and offering sumptuous private suites, fine dining and full spa facilities – the perfect way to soothe those aching muscles after a hard day's trekking!

EXTEND

After six days of solid trekking, you'll deserve a few days' relaxation at the beach. Both India and Thailand offer a plethora of coastal sites to provide a change of scenery. The beaches of Goa and the mystical limestone-fringed coves of Krabi are some of the locales for seaside rejuvenation.



FIRE

The recent eruption of Indonesia's Mount Kelud brought home the fact that Java, the most populous of the country's approximately 17,500 islands, continues to be shaped by sudden volcanic activity. Where better, then, for a fiery volcano vacation?

Lava lovers will be thrilled by Remote Lands' three-day Volcanoes of East Java itinerary, which takes in the island's two best-known volcanic peaks, Mount Bromo and Mount Ijen, as well as pristine rainforest, local villages, and coffee and clove plantations.

You'll begin by checking into **Ijen Resort & Villas**, a beautiful property idyllically located in the Ijen Highlands, from where you'll get your first glimpse of the imposing slopes of Mount Ijen itself. After a good night's sleep, it's time to take on the volcano with a tough 1.9 mi hike up a trail to the caldera, where, as well as spectacular views of the surrounding landscape, you'll be able to watch labourers engaged in the hot and dangerous job of extracting sulphur from the crater – and suddenly the walk back down the slopes won't seem quite so hard.

Your next stop is the charming Dutch colonial city of Malang, where another luxury resort – the historic **Tugu Malang** – awaits. Malang is a lively place with plenty of bars and restaurants, but you'll probably want to get an early night, because the following morning you'll be up very early for the journey to imposing Mount Bromo. It's a three-part journey – after a three-hour drive, you'll cross the stark lunar landscape of the Tengger Sand Sea (either on foot or on horseback – the choice is yours), before climbing 245



Opposite page:
Top to bottom: Taksang Monastery, Bhutan; Locals at Thimphu

This page:
Left to right: Labourer carrying extracted sulphur from the crater; Mount Ijen.

steep steps up to Mount Bromo's best viewing point, from where you can see the region's third volcano – Mount Semeru – belching out steam, and experience one of Asia's most impressive sunrises (well worth the early start).

You'll be sweaty, dusty and tired – so thankfully your last stop will be Tugu Malang for a cold drink, a shower and a relaxing massage.

STAY

Tugu Malang is one of Indonesia's most charming properties. A converted Dutch colonial mansion, it has just 49 rooms, all boasting antiques and artworks to give a real old-world feel. Despite its compact size, it boasts several restaurants, bars and even a private fine dining room, as well as a swimming pool and a full-service spa.

EXTEND

There's no reason why your Indonesian adventure should begin in Ijen or end in Malang. Bali is a good starting point for a side trip – a 45-minute boat ride from Bali's west coast and a short transfer will get you to Ijen; and Yogyakarta; also, the nearby temples of Borobudur, are easily reached from Malang.



This page:
Left to right: View of the Mount Everest, Nepal;
Flying in an ultra-lite over Pokhara

Opposite page:
Top to bottom: Pier at Mabul Island, Malaysia;
One of the activities of Diving Borneo's Aquatic Treasures

AIR

No other country in the world can boast a single mountain measuring over 23,000 ft. Nepal has over a hundred of them, and it's these awe-inspiring heights that make the country a mecca for adventure travellers. If trekking or mountaineering is your thing, a trip to the "roof of the world" simply has to be on your to-do list.

But what to do if you want to see these amazing giants and get an adrenaline rush while you're at it, but don't have the time nor the energy to spend several days trekking? The answer is to take to the air in a variety of craft and quite literally get a bird's eye view of this planet's most spectacular scenery.

Kick off your aerial sightseeing in Nepal's second city Pokhara, nestled in a beautiful valley in the Annapurna region. Remote Lands offers two different flying experiences for thrillseekers, both requiring warm clothing and strong stomachs.

Ultra-lites are a quick and affordable way of getting airborne, and in Pokhara you have two choices – for the less intrepid flyer there's a pod-like craft more resembling a small turboprop plane; for the truly fearless, there's a flying golf cart-like contraption, fully open to the freezing Himalayan air. If the phrase "don't look down" is in your vocabulary, there's little point getting in, for looking down at the amazing views of the valley, rice terraces and mountains is what makes this experience utterly thrilling and unforgettable.

With ultra-lites, you at least have the comforting chug of engines reminding you of the forces keeping you airborne. With your next adventure – paragliding – you're entirely in the hands of the elements. You simply strap yourself

to an experienced pilot and run off the edge of a cliff, before you glide into the air and a strange peace descends. Unobstructed views of the valley and the Annapurna range take your mind off the precariousness of your situation, and you'll return to earth way, way too soon.

If ultra-lites and paragliders bring on a case of vertigo, there's a more comfortable way to get up into the Nepalese clouds – a private helicopter flight to the daddy of them all, Mount Everest. Remote Lands' chopper flies you to Everest itself, passing other Himalayan giants including Ganesh and Dorjee, touching down at the world's highest hotel for the most scenic lunch of your life.

STAY

The combination of high altitude and physical exertion means a good night's rest is important in Nepal. The traditional Nepali house that is **Dwarika's**, located near Kathmandu, received a coveted World Heritage Award for outstanding historical preservation, and offers full luxury hotel facilities as well as nightly live jazz. Meanwhile, **Tiger Mountain Lodge** in Pokhara Valley boasts 19 bungalows with spectacular views of the Annapurna range, along with a mountain-view swimming pool and a table d'hôte menu using locally sourced organic produce.

EXTEND

Combine your airborne adventures with trekking, climbing or more leisurely sightseeing with one of Remote Lands' numerous Nepal itineraries. Classic Nepal is a good introduction to this stunning country; National Treasures of Nepal takes you on a tour of the country's numerous UNESCO World Heritage Sites; Ultimate Nepal Trek is an epic 24-day journey through the Annapurna range, strictly for hardcore hikers.



WATER

The name “Borneo” instantly conjures up numerous images: its iconic orangutans, its dense jungles, maybe its highest point, the fearsome Mount Kinabalu amongst others. But while Borneo is justly famous for the teeming life of its rainforests, there is plenty going on beneath the waves too.

It was in the waters off Borneo’s coast, around the island of Mabul, that muck diving – delving into the sediment on the ocean floor and unearthing the creatures that live therein – originated, and the area is now considered one of the world’s best spots for muck divers and macro diving photographers, as well as more conventional scuba diving.

Whichever variety of diving floats your boat, Remote Lands’ seven-day Diving Borneo’s Aquatic Treasures itinerary enables you to spend a week in this underwater paradise, taking in three world-class dive areas and introducing you to the often rare species that inhabit them.

You’ll begin with a relaxing night at the **Shangri-La Tanjung Aru Beach Resort** in Kota Kinabalu, kicking off the following day with a short flight to Mabul, where a boat transfer takes you to your floating resort, **Mabul Water Bungalows** – a recently opened, purpose-built dive resort close to Sipadan Island where you’ll spend the next five nights.

For the rest of your stay, Remote Lands organises daily dives in the area’s best dive spots, starting with world famous Sipadan. Formed by corals growing on top of an extinct volcano, it’s home to 15 world-class dive sites, including deep wall dives, hosting an incredible array of species



including hawksbill and greenback turtles, manta rays, eagle rays, reef, hammerhead and whale sharks and schools of barracuda.

Neighbouring Mabul is where you’ll get down and dirty on the ocean floor, muck diving amongst reclusive species such as seahorses and octopuses; while Kepalai offers colourful coral reefs and the area’s best wreck diving.

Once you resurface for the last time, you’ll have time to acclimatise in your water bungalow before flying back to solid ground, where those orangutans, jungles and mountain slopes await!

STAY

You’ll spend five nights at Mabul Water Bungalows. Built for divers, it offers 15 private bungalows right on the water, all with air-conditioning, satellite TV and private balconies. The resort also has a restaurant, dive shop and spa.

EXTEND

Between underwater adventures, Borneo offers a wealth of land-based activities. Take a private cruise up the Kinabatangan River; get up close to orangutans at the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre; or take a spectacular two-day hike to the summit of Mount Kinabalu. [T](#)

WWW.REMOTELANDS.COM