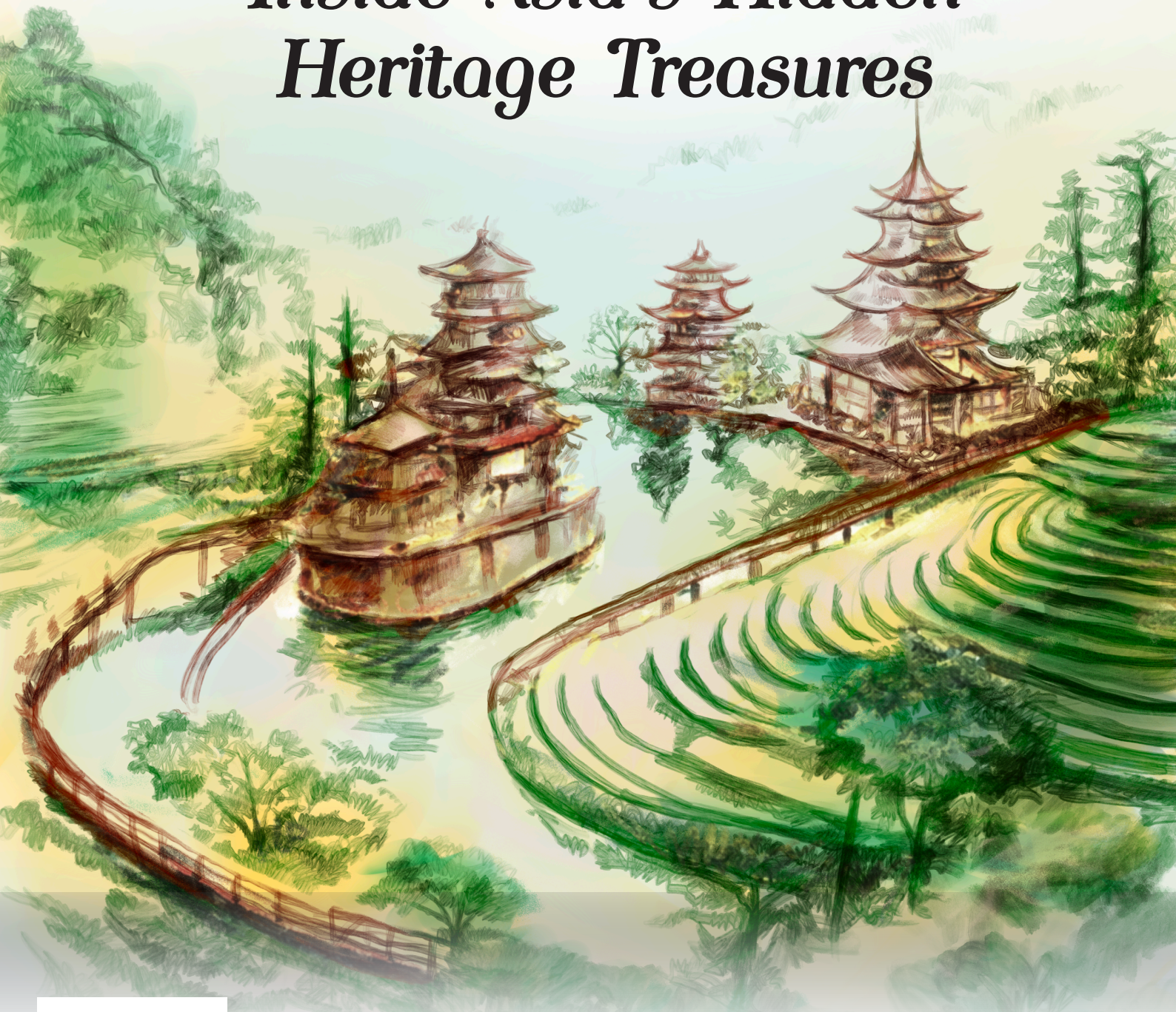




BRINGING ASIA CLOSER

# *Inside Asia's Hidden Heritage Treasures*



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Many culturally rich destinations await those seeking to explore the region's heritage spots. Asia News Network's members highlight a few, in this special e-book.





BRINGING ASIA CLOSER

# Inside Asia's Hidden Heritage Treasures

The Daily Star

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THAT THE PEOPLE SHALL BE INFORMED

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An aerial view of the Kuala Lumpur skyline featuring the four main towers (from left) of The Exchange TRX, KLCC, Merdeka 118 and KL Tower on April 17, 2026. PHOTO: THE STAR

## FOREWORD

# Asia's Living Legacy: Endurance and Evolution

BY ESTHER NG

Asia – the world's largest continent, an area steeped in spirituality, bursting with colours and spicy fragrance in the air.

It's also the base of one of the world's oldest civilisations – among them Mesopotamian, Indus Valley, and Yellow River civilisations – as well as countless cultural traditions.

But Asia is so much more than that – it is living proof of having heritage and legacy live on and evolve.

This is also where ancient legacies and ultra-modern facets exist together. And to understand Asia, is to know Asia. This part of the world, a region rich in cultural

diversity, economic vitality, shared heritage and history, and admirably the fastest tech adoption, holds a more than promising potential for growth.

And like every region the world over, it also carries plenty of historical wounds, political tensions and contrasting national interests that go against unity. But Asia has winning factors, assets that will only boost not just the global economy, but togetherness.

The next steps must be taken not in isolation but in building bridges and bonds among the Asian people.

It is the reason why, we the members of Asia News Network – an alliance of 20 leading titles of this region – have set as our mission: Bringing Asia Closer.

In the midst of increasing global interdependence, regional cooperation is no longer a luxury – it has become a necessity.

Whether it's India's blossoming tech ecosystem, China's focus on green tech or South Korea's cultural tsunami that has practically taken over the world – like it or not, Asia is now setting the pace.

And this is significant because while it is more than capable of setting the pace over at the tech side, the heritage of Asia stretches back thousands of years, sculpted by rivers, deserts, mountains and seas born in the early days.

UNESCO lists more than 260 heritage sites across the region, with nearly 60 of them in China and over 45 sites in India.

The mystical Silk Road carried not only produce and trade goods but culture, heritage and teachings. And it did its job admirably.

Much of Asia's sense of wonder is rooted in its philosophies, which influences its people's understanding of community, morality and behaviour – respect for elders, harmony with nature and interconnectivity with the larger whole.

Nature, too, has always played a pivotal part in Asia's magic. From the tropical rainforests to the famed Himalayas, from winding rivers to hillside paddy fields, nature is not just a part of the Asian landscape but the source of everyday life.



This photo shows an aerial view of a snow-covered section of the Great Wall of China at Shuiguan, north of Beijing, after an overnight snowfall on December 15, 2023. PHOTO: AFP

Asia's magic also lives in the values and outlook of its people. To explore this facet of Asia means taking the first step in getting to know what this continent has to offer.

This book celebrates the balance of modernity and the inherent heritage of the Asian world. I must warn you that it offers only the tip of the iceberg that is the foundation of this culture-rich continent. And a second one is in the offing.



A dancer performs the Cham dance during the 'Thimphu Tshechu' festival at Tashichho Dzong Buddhist monastery in Thimphu on September 14, 2024. PHOTO: AFP

To the non-Asians flicking through these stories, this is by no means a precis of what Asia is made of but a peek into what its people and their heritage are all about.

It will invariably reveal what the Asian history is like, and, of course, not all of it is pretty. You will see the remnants of war, hardships, colonialisation, displacement of sorts which had deeply affected the Asian identity. By this, I mean its people and their very surroundings.

But this does not mean Asia is full of wretchedness.

We inherited a priceless form of heritage which speaks of endurance and survival, two of the most accurate descriptions of all things Asian.

Hopefully, this book helps you reflect on your own heritage, your own history and the trails that your fellow countrymen generations past had marched on, and the rich legacy you are still discovering...

Perhaps this will only bring about a reminder of your own story, something that you might have forgotten, in your daily busy life, to be so proud of.

To the Asians looking through the same stories here, this is just a gentle call to remember what we are made of, our history, our DNA, the reason why we are the way we are. And it is something to be proud of indeed.



### ABOUT THE WRITER:

**Datin Paduka Esther Ng** is Chairperson of the Asia News Network and Chief Content Officer of Star Media Group, Malaysia.





Bangladeshi artisans weave traditional Jamdani, keeping heritage alive one thread at a time. PHOTO: SHAHREAR KABIR HEEMEL/THE DAILY STAR

## INTRODUCTION

# Bringing Asia Closer

BY MAHFUZ ANAM

The Asia News Network (ANN) was created 27 years ago to increase our knowledge of each other. Most Asian countries had advanced a lot, became more educated, skilled, confident and prosperous but did not have adequate knowledge about each other.

Our mutual understanding mostly depended on how the foreign news agencies and globally reputed newspapers, networks, and media outlets covered us.

When something would happen, be it a political upheaval or a natural calamity, say, in Malaysia or Indonesia or Bangladesh, we in the rest of Asia would depend totally on how the international news agencies or the correspondents of foreign news outlets would cover it which we would reproduce in our local papers or online media.

This coverage gave a perspective which in many cases we found to be problematic.

This awareness led 20 leading English language dailies and a select number of national news agencies of Asia from Japan to Pakistan, covering most of the

countries of Asia, to form a network to exchange news, views and features about ourselves for the reading and viewing of the general public of our respective countries. Each of these newspapers could publish 8 current news stories daily and as many feature stories, especially dealing with cultural heritage, as the respective papers found interesting.

In the process of doing this we realised that an effective way of “Bringing Asia Closer” – which we made into our tagline – was not only to learn more about our political and economic achievements but focus heavily on our culture and heritage, including dance, music, literature, food, and history.

As we worked together, we realised that in addition to daily exchanges, we needed to put together our collective heritage in an electronic book form, which would put our rich legacy within one cover and in a very user-friendly manner. So we started a process of collecting our cultural and historical past and putting it together in the form of an e-book, which can be downloaded and put on our websites or reproduced in each of our publications.



South Korean students wearing traditional hanbok dresses bow as they attend a graduation and coming-of-age ceremony at a girls' high school in Seoul. PHOTO: AFP

The purpose of this e-book is to promote greater knowledge about our past and present in terms of cultural heritage. The idea is that we must learn more about each of us.

This we believe will help to create a collective understanding of ourselves and our neighbours, even in those countries that are far away. This will lead to greater self-confidence – an essential ingredient to make our interaction in today’s globalised world more long lasting.

The challenge is that in an international environment where we regularly mix with people of other cultures and languages, it is necessary that we strengthen our own sense of identity so that we can represent our culture and make the interaction more meaningful. The more we know about ourselves, the more we are at ease in dealing with others.

This also helps us to appreciate our differences that we discover while interacting with others. In this way, we end up appreciating and respecting them. What we learn today through social media, YouTube and other means of instant connection is useful but can be based on superficial knowledge, and sometimes even distorted viewpoints.

We realise more the importance of this e-book when put into the context that after the Second World War, the global narrative on Asia slipped out of our hands and gave the Western news and views outlets – an outlet of the previous colonial empires – a near monopoly. It is they who had the power to tell the world about Asia’s past, present and future possibilities.

So powerful was their capacity to tell our stories that it affected our own understanding and thinking about ourselves.

During the Cold War period, Western narratives about Asia were deeply impacted by the ideological competition that divided the world. In telling Asian stories, this ideological divide got reflected in stories, especially those related to the Korean War, the events in Indonesia following Sukarno’s fall and rise of Gen. Suharto, the war in Vietnam, and the success of the Chinese revolution.

It is only in the last decade or so that wars in Asia stopped, and we could relaunch our mutual discovery

of each other’s cultural heritage. This journey of “rediscovery” is what the ANN was created for, of which the e-book is an integral part.

It is now well proven that Asia is the cradle of world civilisation. It is home to the oldest known historical sites, like the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia and China, which can be credited to have laid the foundations of early language learning, astronomy, medical science, agriculture, city planning and various religions.

Asia is the region that gave birth to a vast array of cultures, languages, music, literature and dance. Understanding these heritages is fundamental to getting to know our self-worth and the worthiness of others.

We also came to know how the interactions between our cultures, languages, and vocabulary influenced each other and how intertwined our heritage was. This greatly enhanced our respect for each other’s legacies and made us realise how close we were to each other as we evolved in our different ways.

This continent made many original contributions in vital areas like mathematics, algebra, science, technology, art, philosophy and economics. Asian traditions and practices such as yoga, meditation and certain culinary techniques have gained global recognition.

The impact of religious influence was a magnificent story in its own right. The impact of Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Islam brought the whole of Asia together and assisted us in learning from one another.

Today, many Asian nations are major global economic and political powers. It is emerging more and more as the hub of innovation with immense economic and political potential and implications.

An increasing number of scholars and experts are using the term “Asian Century” to indicate the future. That is where Asia has come and we must work together to realise it, understand it, and strengthen it so that the future truly belongs to Asia.

As the world recognises Asia more and more, it is crucial that we Asians know more and more about ourselves. Our collective success can only come from our collective knowledge and awareness of each other.

However big or small the Asian countries are, each of us has a magnificent cultural heritage that not only we, but also the world at large, has a lot to learn from. This is the purpose of this e-book, and one that will help Bring Asia Closer, which is the foundational motto of Asia News Network.



An aerial view of the temples of Bagan, an ancient city and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in Myanmar. PHOTO: AFP

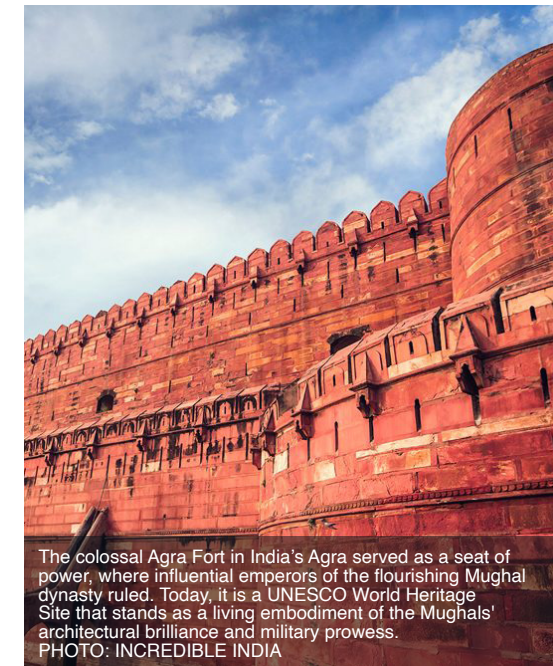
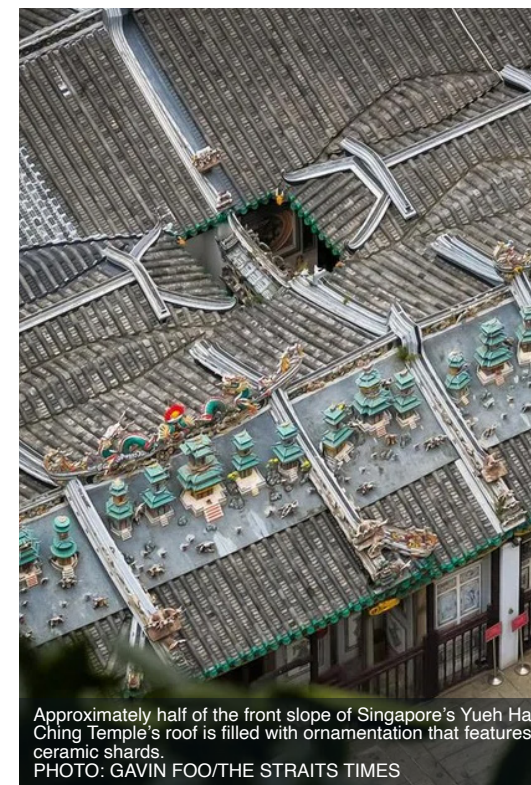
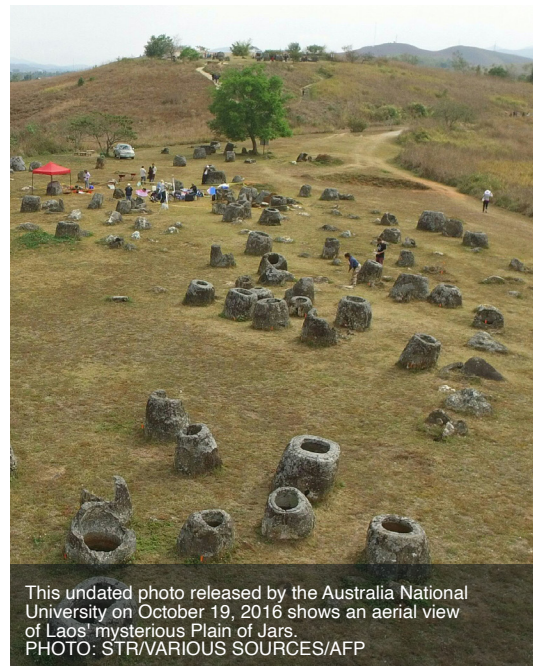


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Balinese people carry an "Ogoh-Ogoh" effigy during a parade on the eve of "Nyepi" in Badung, on Indonesia's resort island of Bali, on March 28, 2025. PHOTO: AFP

ASIAN HERITAGE 101

Exploring Asia’s vibrant cultural tapestry

BY JOHANNA L. AÑES-DE LA CRUZ

Asia is known for its size as much as for its diverse cultures. Its breathtaking geographic breadth stretches from sultry Indonesia and the Philippines to the blistering summit of the Himalayas and the arid deserts of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Its vastness encompasses everything from the ancient civilisations of China and India to the diverse ethnicities and languages of Southeast Asia and the modern wonders of Japan and South Korea. The region has been shaped by various historical influences, including Indian, Chinese, and Muslim, to name a few, as well as by colonial cultures. All of which have profoundly influenced its social fabric and cultural and political institutions.

Asia is often divided into subregions guided by geography, like East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia, each with its unique characteristics. Throughout history, there has been significant cultural exchange and interaction between different regions and countries on the continent, leading to the spread of ideas, religions, and customs, resulting in one endlessly fascinating region.

To write about even just one country’s unique culture would be a mammoth undertaking. What we have here, instead, is a quick overview of the distinct cultural hallmarks that make each Asian country unique.

SOUTHEAST ASIA



People shop for food at stalls near Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque in Brunei on Borneo island on January 10, 2024. PHOTO: AFP

BRUNEI

The sultanate’s compact size belies a rich culture, one that’s steeped in Malay and Islamic traditions. Much like its Southeast Asian neighbours, Bruneian society has a strong emphasis on respect for elders and familial ties. Traditional arts, Islamic architecture, and conservative customs influence cultural expressions, including dress and social etiquette.



Cambodians roll out a 1,149.8 metre-long krama scarf so it can be declared as the world's longest hand-woven scarf, in Phnom Penh on July 1, 2018. PHOTO: AFP

CAMBODIA

Theravada Buddhism pervades much of Cambodian culture, influencing its festivals, art, and everyday life. Beyond the majestic Angkor Wat, Khmer culture is known for its mesmerising dance – particularly the elegant Apsara dance – and its ornate sculptures. Cambodia is also known for the krama, a woven textile associated with traditional practices and cultural expressions of daily Cambodian life. This rectangular cloth, made of either cotton or silk, features a variety of grid-pattern motifs. The krama was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2024.



A five-year-old boy who aspires to be a dalang (puppet master) plays with a puppet after the performance by Yogyakarta’s Wayang Kulit (shadow puppet) theatre group Sanggar Widya Pramana at The Local Market, organised by non-profit Kuka Indonesia, which supports education for underprivileged communities, in Jakarta on February 9, 2025. PHOTO: AFP

INDONESIA

It’s no surprise that the world’s largest archipelago is a cultural melting pot. Indonesia boasts hundreds of ethnic groups and languages. Though the Javanese and Sundanese are dominant, the archipelagic nation’s many other groups, like the Balinese and Batak, contribute to its captivating cultural variety. Islam is the majority religion, but Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity are also present. Traditional arts, dance, music, and rituals vary widely across the archipelago, reflecting local histories and beliefs. Among the most popular is the ancient Javanese shadow puppetry called wayang kulit, known for its elaborate puppets and complex musical styles. Wayang kulit was inscribed in 2008 on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity



This picture, taken on September 30, 2023, shows food offerings during the Kuda Kepang performance in Kulai, Malaysia’s Johor state. PHOTO: AFP

MALAYSIA

Malaysia is known for being a melange of Malay, Chinese, and Indian influences, which have seeped into all aspects of life, especially in its famed cuisine and vibrant festivities. Its history as a trading hub, specifically with China and India, has also shaped its cultural landscape. Islam is the official religion, but other faiths are practised freely. Beyond the official holidays and religious festivities, important life events such as birth, circumcision (for young Muslim men), and marriage are usually celebrated by a feast, known in Malay as *kenduri*.



Boys dressed in traditional attire take part in a parade during a Buddhist Novitiation Ceremony at the Hlegu Township in Yangon on March 15, 2025. PHOTO: AFP

MYANMAR

Myanmar’s vibrant culture is influenced heavily by Theravada Buddhism, as well as its neighbours India, China, and Thailand. It still observes traditional ceremonies, such as the Shinhyu initiation for boys and ear-piercing for girls, both of which mark important life stages and are celebrated with elaborate rituals. Myanmar’s culture also features vibrant festivals like Thingyan, where community and spirituality converge, and traditional arts, including dance, music, and crafts, remain vital.



East Timorese girls perform a traditional dance during the 30th founding anniversary celebration of Falintil in Manatuto, 20 August 2005. PHOTO: AFP

EAST TIMOR (TIMOR-LESTE)

ASEAN’s youngest nation, tiny Timor-Leste’s distinct geographical location and colonial history lend its culture a blend of indigenous Austronesian traditions and Portuguese influence. This is reflected in its language, religion (predominantly Catholicism), and festivals. The Timorese have a deep love for their traditional arts, with their music, dance, and storytelling a fundamental part not only of Timor-Leste’s cultural heritage but of people’s social life.



This photograph, taken on April 15, 2019, shows a man offering prayers to the masks of the legendary ancestors "Pou Nyer" and "Nyar Nyer" to mark the Lao New Year or "Pi Mai" celebrations at the Wat Xiengthong Buddhist temple in Luang Prabang. PHOTO: AFP

LAOS

Laos has a culture strongly influenced by Theravada Buddhism, which permeates daily life and festivals. Laotian heritage, however, also carries influences from animism and various ethnic traditions. The country’s rural lifestyle and the Mekong River are central to its cultural identity, with many ceremonies linked to agriculture and spirituality. Chief among its ethnic rituals is the baci, where strings are tied around a person’s wrist to preserve good luck. It is associated with a person’s major life transitions, such as getting married, giving birth, entering monkhood, and even bidding farewell to foreign guests.



Schoolchildren perform the "sinulog dance" while holding religious icons to welcome the historical statue of Santo Niño, or baby Jesus, brought from Cebu Island in the central Philippines, to a church in Manila on August 16, 2015. PHOTO: AFP

PHILIPPINES

Filipino culture is a unique tapestry of indigenous Austronesian roots, Spanish colonial influence, and American cultural elements. Catholicism is dominant, shaping many festivals and social customs. Festivals in the Philippines are called fiestas, which are mostly elaborate celebrations that often honour a patron saint. It’s a yearly tradition, marked by religious rituals, feasting, music, processions, and parades. Fiestas are a key part of Filipino culture, with each barangay, town, and city having its own unique fiesta, most popular of which is the Sinulog in Cebu and the Ati-atihan in Kalibo, Aklan, both of which are dedicated to the Child Jesus.





People buy food for lunch at a hawker centre in Singapore on January 7, 2025. PHOTO: AFP

## SINGAPORE

Like its next-door neighbour, Malaysia, the city-state is defined by its major ethnic groups, including Chinese, Malay, and Indian, among others. A paragon of progress and discipline, Singapore nonetheless is able to blend modernity with its rich heritage through its festivals, arts, and especially its famed cuisine. Singapore hawker culture is so unique and integral to the nation's identity that it was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2020.



A Buddhist devotee pours water on a Buddha statue as part of celebrations of the Buddhist New Year, locally known as Songkran, at the Prachapirom temple in Thailand's southern province of Narathiwat on April 13, 2023. PHOTO: AFP

## THAILAND

Like its neighbours, Cambodia and Laos, Thailand's culture is heavily influenced by Theravada Buddhism. Thai royal traditions are also still very much alive and thriving, giving the kingdom and its proud people a strong sense of national identity. Beyond its golden temples and pagodas, Thailand is known for its traditional dance and festivals like Songkran, which attracts tourists from all over the world. Thai cuisine is also among the most popular in the world, known for its intricate balance of five key flavours: salty, sweet, sour, bitter, and spicy in most of its dishes.



This picture, taken on May 15, 2018, shows water puppets performing at the Thang Long theatre in Hanoi. PHOTO: AFP

## VIETNAM

Vietnamese culture is influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Apart from its rich tradition in literature, art, and music, its history of resistance and resilience shapes its national identity. Like Thailand, Vietnam's cuisine is also loved by many beyond its borders. It is characterised by its use of fresh ingredients, minimal use of dairy and oil, and a harmonious balance of the five fundamental tastes. Vietnam is also known for the beautiful ao dai, a long, slit tunic worn over pants.

## SOUTH ASIA

### BANGLADESH

Bangladesh's culture is rooted in Bengali traditions, with Islam as the predominant religion alongside Hinduism. The country is known for its rich literary heritage, music, and vibrant festivals such as Pohela Boishakh (Bengali New Year), celebrated on April 14, and the National Language Movement Day, observed on Feb 21, which commemorates the struggle to preserve the Bengali language. A unique aspect of Bangladeshi life is ferry travel, which is common due to the country's many rivers. Bangladeshi cuisine centres on rice accompanied by fish (notably the national fish, Hilsa), lentils, and vegetables, with special dishes linked to festivals and seasons.



People march down a street during celebrations marking the 'Bengali New Year' in Dhaka on April 14, 2025. PHOTO: AFP



A priest (C) takes part in a religious procession to mark the Hindu chariot festival of Sri Parthasarthy Swamy temple in Chennai on April 19, 2025. PHOTO: AFP



An angler fishes along a rock jetty in Male on November 15, 2023. PHOTO: AFP

### INDIA

India's geographic breadth is also reflected in its extraordinarily diverse culture, with multiple religions, languages, and ethnic groups coexisting in the world's most populous country. It is known for its rich traditions in music, dance, art, cuisine, as well as its profound spirituality, including Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Islam, and others. Modern Indian culture blends traditional customs with influences from British colonialism and global modernity, resulting in a dynamic and multifaceted cultural landscape.



Bhutanese schoolboys wear typical Bhutanese dance masks as they perform during a cultural event to celebrate the birthday of Bhutan's fourth king in Thimphu on June 2, 2013. PHOTO: AFP

### BHUTAN

Bhutanese culture is profoundly influenced by Vajrayana Buddhism, which seeps into its art, architecture, and festivals. The country is known for its emphasis on Gross National Happiness, a philosophy and framework used by the Bhutanese government to measure and promote national well-being and happiness. Dzongs (fortress-monasteries), colourful festivals, and traditional attire are among the cultural hallmarks of this serene kingdom perched in the eastern Himalayas.



Traditional masked dancers perform during the 'Shikali' dance festival in Kathmandu on April 5, 2024. PHOTO: AFP

### NEPAL

Religion plays a central role in Nepalese culture, with Hinduism and Buddhism being the predominant faiths, which both coexist harmoniously with Islam, Christianity, and other beliefs. Its festivals are known for being colourful and closely tied to religious and social customs, such as the Mata Tirtha Aunsi, a festival honouring mothers. Nepali dance traditions, such as the Dishka, which is performed at weddings, reflect the country's ethnic diversity. Like Bhutan, this Himalayan country is known for its spirituality and deep love for nature.

## EAST AND CENTRAL ASIA



This photo, taken on July 11, 2020, shows wrestlers competing on the opening day of the annual Naadam sports festival near Ulaanbaatar, in Mongolia. PHOTO: AFP

### MONGOLIA

Mongolian culture is known for its nomadic pastoral lifestyle, which has persisted for over 3,000 years. Many families still live in traditional round dwellings called gers (yurts). Horses, meanwhile, hold sacred status as essential transportation and cherished companions. Mongolia celebrates the annual Naadam festival in July, also known as the "Olympics of Nomads," featuring the "Three Manly Games" of Central Asian steppe culture: Mongolian wrestling, horse racing, and archery.



Women dressed in kimonos chat as they arrive to attend a ceremony at Todoroki Arena to mark the "Coming of Age Day," which honours people who turn 20 and signifies the entry to adulthood, in Kawasaki, Kanagawa prefecture, Japan, on January 12, 2026. PHOTO: AFP

### JAPAN

Japanese culture strikes the perfect balance between tradition and modernity, with distinct Shinto and Buddhist influences. It is known for its arts, such as the tea ceremony, ikebana, noh, and kabuki, as much as it is for its groundbreaking technology. The Japanese are also known for their deep reverence for nature, as reflected in their festivals and customs, such as hanami or cherry blossom viewing. Japanese cuisine is also top-notch, with dishes such as ramen, sushi, and katsu winning palates – and hearts – the world over. The kimono, with its rich history and ornate designs, is one of the most recognisable traditional garments.



People wear traditional Hanbok clothing as they attend a culture festival in Seoul on May 19, 2023. PHOTO: AFP

### SOUTH KOREA

South Korean culture combines Confucian values with modern innovations. It is perhaps best known for its lively entertainment scene, led by K-pop and K-dramas. Korean cuisine gives others on this list a run for their money, too, with food like kimchi, bulgogi, ramyeon, and samgyeopsal gaining worldwide popularity. Like Japan's kimono, Korea's vibrant traditional costume clothing, hanbok, is easily recognisable. Korean literature has also been getting the international recognition it deserves, especially after Han Kang won the Nobel Prize for Literature.



A 238m-long dragon dance is performed in front of the A-Ma Temple during celebrations on the first day of the Chinese lunar new year in Macau on January 22, 2023. PHOTO: AFP

### CHINA

China has one of the world's oldest continuous civilisations. It is deeply influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which, at their core, emphasise family, respect for elders, reverence for ancestors, and social harmony. China boasts a culture rich in arts, literature, philosophy, and festivals like the Chinese New Year or Spring Festival, which is celebrated by Chinese communities across the world. It's also a gastronomic wonderland, with a cuisine as varied as its landscape and marine life.



A Chinese calligrapher writes good fortune messages for the Lunar New Year of the Snake at his shop in Hong Kong on January 24, 2025. PHOTO: AFP

### HONG KONG

Hong Kong's heritage blends traditional Chinese culture with British colonial influences, resulting in a unique cosmopolitan culture that puts commerce, education, and the arts at the forefront.



A woman burns incense on the first day of the Lunar New Year of the Snake at a temple in Keelung on January 29, 2025. PHOTO: AFP

### TAIWAN

Taiwan's culture preserves Chinese traditions with influences from indigenous peoples and Japanese culture.

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Paharpur stands as the second largest single Buddhist monastery south of the Himalayas. PHOTO: THE DAILY STAR



# BANGLADESH



PAHARPUR

# A peek at Bangladesh's Buddhist past



Located to the northwest of Bangladesh, in the district of Naogaon, the ruins of the Buddhist vihara at Paharpur are a reminder of the country's pre-Islamic glory. PHOTO: THE DAILY STAR

**BY MANNAN MASHHUR ZARIF**

*The Daily Star*

Somapura Mahavihara – the Great Monastery situated in the “locality of the moon” – is one of the oldest monuments in the country and a UNESCO heritage site. Located to the northwest of Bangladesh in the district of Naogaon, the ruins of the Buddhist vihara at Paharpur are a reminder of the country’s pre-Islamic glory, and, to this day, serve as a cue to what was once a flourishing Buddhist culture.

Legend has it that it was Buddha himself who introduced his teachings on this plain, and, later, direct disciples of Siddhartha Gautama spread the knowledge far and wide. Historians credit the Pala Empire for playing an important role in spreading the religion in this part of the subcontinent.

Based on an inscription found on a clay tablet, the Mahavihara – colloquially termed “Paharpur” – was established during the reign of Raja Dharmapala (781-821 CE), the second, and greatest, Pala ruler. Subsequent monarchs undertook major reconstructions at least twice, solidifying the status of Paharpur as a seat of great religious learning and practice.

Renowned sage and reformist, Atish Dipankar Srijnan, once taught the Mahayana form of Buddhism at this very site, and between the 8th and 12th century CE, the monastery enjoyed an unsurpassed reputation in the Buddhist world.

The reason for Paharpur’s slow decline is unclear and, before excavation work began in the early 20th century, the structure had been buried for about 500 years! Restoration work spanning almost a century has revealed its architectural magnificence.

The ancient complex is quadrangular, 180m by 181m, in plan – typical of Mahaviharas of that time. In the centre of the open courtyard of the monastery, there stands the trace of a grand four-faced temple rising about 70 feet (21m) above ground level.

Rows of cells facing inwards towards the main shrine in the middle of the courtyard compose the monastery’s outside walls. These cells, which made up the exterior wall of the monastery during its final construction stages, numbered 177.

The peripheral walls feature terracotta plaques depicting dancing nymphs, fish, elephants, and other motifs. The images currently seen are later-day additions, as the original plaques have been removed for their preservation.

The grandeur of Paharpur, at the time of its completion, was unlike any other vihara in Asia and to this day, stands as the second largest single Buddhist monastery south of the Himalayas! The architecture of this site had a profound influence on the later-day construction of Buddhist temples that we now see in Myanmar, Central Java... as far away as Cambodia!

Artefacts found at the site and the surrounding places are now on display at the Paharpur Museum, located within the complex featuring the ruins of the monastery, enriching visitors’ understanding of the site’s cultural and historical importance.

The Ruins of Paharpur lie some considerable distance (approximately 235km) away from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, the main and largest international airport in Bangladesh. One can always take a connecting flight to Rajshahi Airport (103km away from the site) or Saidpur Airport (91km from Paharpur) and then travel to Bogura city by car.



Artefacts found at the site and the surrounding places are now on display at the Paharpur Museum, located within the complex. PHOTO: THE DAILY STAR





Restoration work spanning almost a century has revealed the ruins of Paharpur’s architectural magnificence. PHOTO: THE DAILY STAR

An affordable option is to take a bus from Dhaka to Bogura, which is 190km away as the crow flies.

While the vihara is reachable from surrounding districts by road and rail, renting a car from Bogura to Paharpur offers the most comfortable and convenient combination that is enhanced by the city’s hospitality and housing options.

Bogura is a centre of commerce and economic activity but within a few minutes of leaving the town, one can get a taste of the country’s famed, picturesque greenery.

It is also possible to make other day trips to other historical sites nearby like Mahasthangarh, situated in Sibganj, Bogura, where one finds the remains of an entrenched city called Pundranagara. It is one of the oldest archaeological relics in Bangladesh, dating back to 300 BCE.

A journey from the town to Paharpur will take you down a winding road with scenes of pastoral Bengal on either side. It’s a short trip, hardly a 100-minute drive, and one that a traveller, unaccustomed to the Bengali way of living, will thoroughly enjoy.



Somapura Mahavira is located 256km to the northwest of Dhaka.

For travellers planning a day trip, both the complex and its surroundings offer a variety of local cuisines, inviting exploration of flavours that reflect Bangladesh's culinary heritage. There is also a rest house nearby – a facility that can be availed for an overnight stay with prior, special permission from the custodian of the site.

As the night breaks into dawn, the first light reflected on the central temple creates an ethereal experience. Winter is perhaps the best season to travel as summer days in Northwest Bangladesh are hot and humid.

Tourist guides are hard to come by, so for a better understanding of the architecture and the historic/social importance of the archaeological site, do some prior online research. Check the weather forecast; lightweight, breathable clothing is recommended.

## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

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BHUTAN

Chimi Lhakhang is among the oldest monasteries in Bhutan.  
PHOTO: KUENSEL





The temple's reputation as a fertility shrine is reinforced by the testimonials left behind by couples, including tourists, who have had children following their visit to the temple. PHOTO: KUENSEL

PUNAKHA

# The fount of fertility

Chimi Lhakhang in Bhutan is a must-visit for tourists.

BY KINLEY TSHERING  
*Kuensel*

The 15th-century Buddhist temple, Chimi Lhakhang, is by far one of the most iconic Buddhist temples in Bhutan. Just about a 20-minute walk through the terraced paddy fields of the idyllic village of Sopsukha in Punakha, this ancient temple is perched on a hillock, overlooking the broad vistas of Wangdue valley to the south and Punakha to the north.

The temple owes its spiritual significance and sacredness to something quite odd – the phallic blessings believed to help women conceive – and of course, the legacy of its patron saint, Lama Drukpa Kuenley. The maverick Buddhist master, famously dubbed the “Divine Madman”, is celebrated in Bhutan and Tibet for his unconventional methods of teaching Buddhism and mystical charisma.

History

The 14th Drukpa hierarch, Ngawang Choegyel, built Chimi Lhakhang in 1499 at the sacred site blessed by Lama Drukpa Kuenley. The temple is among the oldest monasteries in Bhutan.

According to legend, a malevolent demoness named Loro Duem terrorised the people of the region from her stronghold in Dochula. Lama Drukpa Kuenley embarked on a mission to vanquish her. The demoness, who had disguised herself as a dog, was defeated with Lama Drukpa Kuenley’s “flaming thunderbolt of wisdom”, which is a symbolic representation of his divine power.

Following her defeat, the demoness was buried on the hilltop where Chimi Lhakhang stands today. He named the place “Chi Mi”, meaning “No Dog”, to celebrate his victory over evil. The giant rock near the chorten is said to trap the demon.

The fertility shrine

Chimi Lhakhang’s fame as a fertility shrine is deeply rooted in Lama Drukpa Kuenley’s unconventional practices. Known for his indulgent lifestyle filled with wine and women, he promoted intercourse as a means to achieve enlightenment. This audacious philosophy gave rise to the temple’s association with fertility blessings.



The fertility ritual at Chimi Lhakhang is a unique experience. Couples yearning for a child are blessed by a large wooden phallus. The ritual involves carrying this wooden phallus around the temple’s perimeter three times. Couples also have the option to spend a night at the temple. This is believed to enhance the chances of conception, invoking the blessings of the Divine Madman.

When the child is born, many couples return to Chimi Lhakhang to present their baby and seek blessings. The infant is then bestowed with the name “Kinley”, honouring the patron saint, or “Chimi”, in reverence to the temple.

The temple’s reputation as a fertility shrine is reinforced by the numerous testimonials left behind by couples, including tourists, who have had children following their visit to the temple. The walls of Chimi Lhakhang are adorned with heartfelt notes and tokens from grateful families. These testimonials narrate stories of couples who, after seeking blessings from the temple, were blessed with children.

Significance of phallic symbol

One of the main relics of Chimi Lhakhang is the original wooden phallus brought by Lama Drukpa Kuenley from Tibet. This 25cm (10 inches) wooden relic, adorned with a silver handle, is used to bless visitors and pilgrims.

In fact, the nearby village of Sopsukha is chock-o-block with small handicraft outlets – a mini bazaar of sorts – that sell a plethora of exotic phallus artefacts – of all shapes, sizes, and designs – to visitors and tourists.

Bhutanese believe that the phallus wards off evil spirits and safeguards them from malicious gossip. It is therefore not uncommon to come across phallic paintings – some graphic, others wildly imaginative – adorning the exterior walls and doors of local homes. One can also find large, crossed phalluses erected outside Bhutanese homes or suspended from the eaves of rooftops.

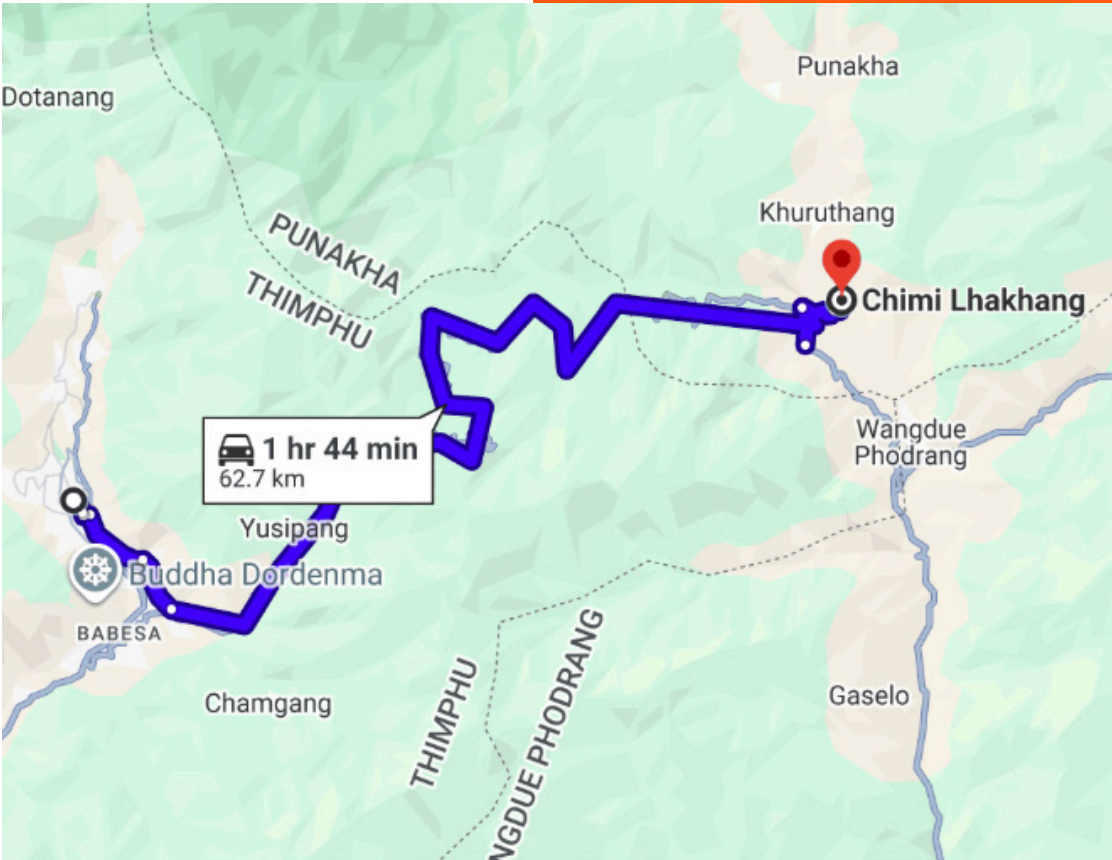
The Divine Madman’s legacy

Lama Drukpa Kuenley’s stories – the stuff of legends – are filled with sexual escapades and subjugation of demons, bordering on the magical and the supernatural. The stories are an intrinsic part of the cultural fabric of Bhutanese society and folklore. Known as the crazy wisdom, his teachings continue to inspire Buddhist scholars and devotees alike.

Born in Tibet and trained at Ralung Monastery, he travelled extensively across Bhutan and Tibet, using his crazy, unorthodox methods to convey Buddhist teachings. His eccentricity, characterised by humour and unconventional practices, was meant to challenge societal norms and reveal deeper truths.

One of the most remarkable anecdotes about Lama Drukpa Kuenley is the legend of how he created Bhutan’s national animal – the Takin. According to lore, he fashioned this unique creature by merging the head of a goat with the body of a cow. Such stories simply underscore his reputation for blending the sacred with the fantastical, and his legacy endures through both historical records and popular folklore.

A trip to Chimi Lhakhang is a must for visitors to Bhutan, especially those who want to be blessed with a child.



A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

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Chimi Lhakhang is located on Thimphu Punakha Highway, some 10km (6.2 miles) away from Punakha.

The journey to Chimi Lhakhang begins from the village of Sopsokha, which is set against the dramatic landscape of the Punakha Valley. The hike takes about 30 minutes to an hour, depending on the pace. Along the way, hikers can observe traditional Bhutanese farmhouses adorned with phallic symbols, reflecting the influence of Lama Drukpa Kuenley.

The hike also allows travellers to interact with local villagers and observe their daily lives and cultural practices. The path is well-marked and relatively easy, making it accessible to hikers of all skill levels. The hike ends at Chimi Lhakhang, nestled on a small hill, where visitors are rewarded with peaceful and panoramic views of the valley.





## BRUNEI

Kota Batu is home to the country's first, largest and oldest archaeological sites, which include the mausoleums of two of the earliest Sultans of Brunei. PHOTO: BORNEO BULLETIN





These hidden monuments offer a delightful peek into the past, showcasing the sultans who crafted Brunei's identity, not just in Islam but as a formidable force in days of yore. PHOTO: BORNEO BULLETIN

KOTA BATU

The royal mausoleums

BY WARDI WASIL  
Borneo Bulletin

Welcome to Brunei Darussalam, the Abode of Peace, where majesty is not just a word but a living, breathing experience.

This majesty is found not only in our lush, pristine jungles but in almost every piece of land, each steeped in rich history that ties back to our national philosophy of being a Malay, Islamic Monarchy.

While our ecotourism offerings and particularly the iconic water village often steal the spotlight – did you know it's the largest floating water village in the world, with roots tracing back to the 16th century? – there's a treasure trove of lesser-known historical sites just waiting to be discovered.

Venture a few kilometres beyond the Venice of the East, and you'll stumble upon monuments that are as old, if not older, than the famed water village itself.

Brunei is renowned for its enduring line of monarchs. Our current ruler, His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Haji Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam, the 29th Sultan, continues a legacy that has shaped our nation.

These hidden monuments offer a delightful peek into the past, showcasing the sultans who crafted Brunei's identity, not just in Islam but as a formidable force in days of yore.

Just 4km from the city centre lies Kota Batu, believed to be the original site of Brunei's capital from the 14th to 17th century.

During that time, it served as the administrative centre, trading hub and main settlement of Brunei. Numerous historical artefacts discovered in the area confirm this.

As a result, Kota Batu is home to the country's first, largest and oldest archaeological sites, which include the mausoleums of two of the earliest Sultans of Brunei.

These royal mausoleums belong to Sultan Sharif Ali, the third Sultan, and Sultan Bolkiah, the fifth Sultan.

Both played major roles in shaping Brunei's history and culture. As these tombs are located in Kota Batu because it was believed to be the administrative centre, they are likely near the old palaces.

The archaeological site was discovered in the 1950s, marking a significant milestone in the country's history.

The exact dates when the tombs were erected are still debated, though their ornate designs suggest a lengthy construction period.

This was evidenced after the rediscovery of the mausoleums in the 1950s, which confirmed that Sultan Bolkiah's tomb had been bombed during the Castilian War with Spain in 1578.

Following its rediscovery, extensive research was conducted to confirm its authenticity, and the tomb was carefully reconstructed to restore its historical significance.

Historical records indicate that status was recognised by the size and ornate nature of gravestones.

Sultan Sharif Ali, also known as Sultan Berkat (the Blessed Sultan), ruled from 1425 to 1432 and played a crucial role in strengthening and spreading Islam in Brunei.

He is believed to have Middle Eastern descent, linked to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through his grandson Sayyidina Hassan. Sultan Sharif Ali's efforts in spreading Islam were so significant that he married Princess Ratna Kesuma, the daughter of the second Sultan, Sultan Ahmad.



The exact dates when the tombs were erected are still debated, though their ornate designs suggest a lengthy construction period. PHOTO: BORNEO BULLETIN



Historical records indicate that status was recognised by the size and ornate nature of gravestones. PHOTO: BORNEO BULLETIN



Sultan Sharif Ali also initiated the development of Kota Batu, which became one of the Sultanate’s first known settlements.

The area was called Kota Batu, meaning “stone fort”, because it was fortified with a great defence wall, making Brunei a major trading port in the region.

This fortification not only enhanced the settlement’s defence but also contributed to its prominence as a vital trading hub.

Sultan Bolkiah’s reign marked the golden age of the Bruneian Empire, with influence extending beyond Borneo to parts of the Philippines, including the Sulu and Palawan islands.

Known for his military prowess and diplomatic skills, Sultan Bolkiah expanded Brunei’s territory and established it as a dominant power in the region. His wife, Princess Lela Menchanai, is buried beside him.

A well-known tale of Sultan Bolkiah’s passing involves him being accidentally pricked by a golden needle while resting on his wife’s lap during a voyage, leading to his death.

Upon closer inspection of each tomb, Sultan Sharif Ali’s is crafted from sandstone, adorned with intricate Jawi calligraphy that includes an excerpt from the Quran, his name and his death date.

It was believed that Sultan Sharif Ali requested a simple gravestone, omitting the title “Sharif” to reflect his humility despite his grand lineage.

In contrast, Sultan Bolkiah’s grave is grand, with eight levels, each adorned with elaborate carvings and Jawi inscriptions from the Quran.

The royal mausoleums, protected under Brunei’s Antiquities and Treasure Trove Act of 2006 and overseen by the Museums Department and the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports (MCYS), are considered protected monuments and historical sites.

These royal tombs are unique in their design and historical significance, offering a glimpse into the rich heritage and enduring legacy of Brunei’s sultans.



## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

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**Getting there**  
The Royal Brunei Mausoleum (Kubah Makam Diraja) is located about 2km (1.2 miles) from the city centre of Bandar Seri Begawan.

From Brunei International Airport, head southwest on Jalan Lapangan Terbang towards Jalan Dato Haji Ahmad. Turn left onto Jalan Dato Haji Ahmad and continue onto Jalan Kumbang Pasang. Take a slight right onto Jalan Kianggeh, then turn left onto Jalan Residency.

Continue onto Jalan Kota Batu for about 4km until you arrive at the Kota Batu Archaeology Park, which will be on your right. Inside the park, a heritage trail leads to the royal mausoleums of Sultan Sharif Ali and Sultan Bolkiah.

**Preparing for your trip**  
Brunei Darussalam has a hot and humid climate. Since Kota Batu is near the Brunei River, expect some humidity and mosquitoes. It’s recommended to bring water, a small fan, sunscreen and insect repellent for a comfortable visit.

**Nearby attractions**  
Malay Technology Museum: Located near Kota Batu, this museum showcases traditional Malay craftsmanship and technology. It offers insights into the historical techniques and tools used in Brunei’s past, including woodcarving, metalwork, and traditional boat-building.

Maritime Museum: Just across the Malay Technology Museum, this museum highlights Brunei’s maritime history and its significant role in regional trade.

The exhibits include ship models, navigational instruments, and artefacts that illustrate Brunei’s seafaring heritage and its connections with the wider world.



The royal mausoleums are considered protected monuments and historical sites.  
PHOTO: BORNEO BULLETIN





CAMBODIA

The Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts has designated Chaktomuk Temple as one of Cambodia's rarest and most unique. PHOTO: THE PHNOM PENH POST



PREAH VIHEAR

# Discover Cambodia's ancient Buddha statues

BY HONG RAKSMEY

*The Phnom Penh Post*

While visitors to Cambodia are spoilt for choice when it comes to ancient cultural treasures, one lesser-known temple is gaining popularity.

Chaktomuk Temple, an ancient Buddhist shrine, is attracting more and more tourists, who are drawn to its distinct features.

The temple's four surviving back-to-back Buddha statues – facing north, south, east and west respectively – are regarded as unique in Cambodia.

The temple is located within the vicinity of the Bakan temples, also known as the Preah Khan Kompong Svay archaeological complex, which was built between the 11th and 14th centuries.

The complex, in Preah Vihear province, is about 100km east of its well-known sister temple Angkor Wat.

Prior to extensive 2018 restoration work, the upper half of the structure had collapsed, with the four Buddha statues overgrown with plants, which had eroded the surface of the statues.

The Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts has designated Chaktomuk Temple as one of Cambodia's rarest and most unique.

The temple's design is reminiscent of the four smiling faces of the world-famous Bayon Temple in Angkor Archaeological Park, and was built as a dedication to the four-faced Avloketesvar – a bodhisattva who embodies the compassion of all Buddhas.

“The four directions each Buddha statue faces are about the four Brahmavihara: Metta (loving-kindness), Karuna (compassion), Mudita (joy with others) and Upekkha (equanimity),” Royal Academy of Cambodia archaeological professor Thuy Chan Theoun told *The Phnom Penh Post*.

“As far as I know, Chaktomuk is the only surviving temple with joined back-to-back Buddha statues in the country. It is a unique temple,” he said.

He explained that it was built in the 12th century during the reign of King Jayavarman VII. In that period, the king led his men to the Bakan temples to fight Champa troops before recapturing Yasodharapura (Angkor city) from invading Chams in 1181.

“Bakan Kampong Svay (Preah Khan Kompong Svay) was the largest city in the ancient Kingdom. The former city is where King Jayavarman VII's troops stayed,” said Chan Theoun.

He noted that he has located the remains of destroyed back-to-back Buddha statues in other temples:



The four back-to-back Buddha statues are thought to be unique in Cambodia. PHOTO: THE PHNOM PENH POST

“I found four back-to-back Buddha statues in Wat Trolaeng Keng in Lungvek commune (Kampong Chhnang province), which was another former capital city from 1528 to 1594, after the Angkor Era.

“Now at Wat Trolaeng Keng, we can see only the statues' feet. According to locals, they were dragged to the Tonle Sap lake, east of the pagoda.

“Locals claim that they found the Wat Trolaeng Keng statues in Tonle Sap Lake, saying Siamese troops dragged them there. Fishermen say that they know it is the statues, but they are not capable of lifting them out of the water,” he explained.

There are many other temples in Preah Khan Kompong Svay, such as Preah Domrei, Preah Thkoal, Preah Stung and Mebon.

The Preah Khan Kompong Svay complex spans approximately 25 square kilometres, making it one of the largest archaeological sites in the country.

In March 2020, the site was added to the tentative UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List, in the cultural category. It holds immense historical significance as a major religious and administrative centre during the height of the Khmer Empire. Its strategic location along important trade routes and its extensive infrastructure suggest that it played a crucial role in the region's political and economic life. The site served as a vital hub for both Hindu and Buddhist worship, reflecting the religious syncretism of the time.



The statues are located among the Bakan temples, also known as the Preah Khan Kompong Svay archaeological complex. PHOTO: THE PHNOM PENH POST



The site exemplifies the architectural and engineering prowess of the ancient Khmer, featuring extensive moats, large reservoirs (barays), multiple temple structures and intricate carvings that reflect the empire’s religious and cultural diversity. Its remote location has helped preserve its structures, offering valuable insights into the Khmer civilisation’s urban planning, religious practices and socio-political organisation.

The hydraulic engineering at Preah Khan Kompong Svay is exemplified by its barays and moats. These man-made reservoirs were crucial for water management, supporting agriculture by ensuring a stable water supply throughout the year. They also played a significant role in religious and ceremonial practices, symbolising the cosmic ocean surrounding Mount Meru.

The presence of extensive moats around the temple structures further enhanced the site’s defence mechanisms and added to its aesthetic and symbolic grandeur. These bodies of water reflect the Khmer Empire’s advanced understanding of hydraulic engineering and its importance in sustaining large urban centres and temple complexes.

As an important archaeological site, Preah Khan Kompong Svay continues to be a focal point for research and conservation efforts, contributing to our understanding of Cambodia’s rich cultural heritage.

The site was left abandoned for many years, but after the restoration, the temple structure was restored to its original height of 10m.

“Now, no one drives past without visiting Chaktomuk Temple. They will make a stop to take photos and place offerings for prayer,” said Heritage Authority officer Lee Phearum, who was stationed at the temple along with other rangers.

Chaktomuk Temple can be found to the east of Bakan Temple, in Ronakse commune’s Ta Siang village of Sangkum Thmei district.

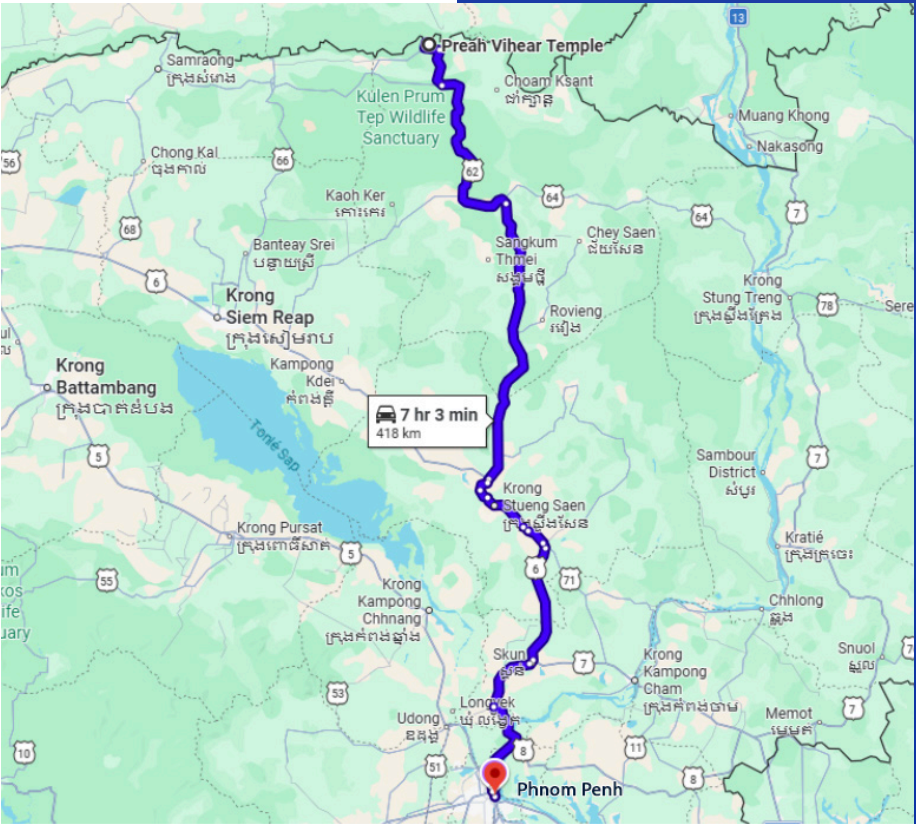
Its remote location is thought to be linked to its proximity to sources of iron, most notably from Dek (the “iron mountain”). Archaeologists have discovered evidence of smelting activities throughout the complex, suggesting extensive weapons production.

Although it is just 100km from Siem Reap, the nature of the roads in rural Cambodia means the journey can take up to four hours by car.

More adventurous tourists can join organised dirt bike tours from Siem Reap town and explore the countryside and rugged terrain between the two locations.

Either way, the mysterious four-faced towers of Chaktomuk will surely be a highlight of any visitor’s adventures in Cambodia. The distant location means fans of ancient culture are sure to have the space to enjoy their own Lara Croft or Indiana Jones-style exploration, without the crowds and photo-bombing tour groups that can sometimes make some tourist attractions feel a little too accessible.

*Additional reporting by Josh Sayle*



Chaktomuk Temple is located in Ta Siang village of Sangkum Thmei district, to the east of Bakan Temple. It is about 100km from Siem Reap, with the journey taking as long as four hours by car. Those looking for an adrenaline rush can join dirt bike tours from Siem Reap to the temple. With its relatively remote location, visitors will be delighted to see far thinner crowds at the temple.

# A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

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One of Kaiyuan Temple's two imposing stone towers.  
PHOTO: CHEN YINGJIE/CHINA DAILY



CHINA



## QUANZHOU

## A sea of possibility

By China Daily

A panorama of Luoyang Bridge.  
PHOTO: ZHENG WENGUI/CHINA DAILY

The legacy of Quanzhou, Fujian province, now recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage site, testifies to how authorities and society together established a commercial maritime hub, Wang Kaihao reports.

It is said that Jiuri Mountain was where the early immigrants in the 3rd century from North China to Quanzhou, Fujian province, climbed and, facing north, were overcome by nostalgia as they gazed in the direction of their war-torn home.

But times change, and centuries later, their descendants, during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), went to the mountain summit but this time their gaze was in the opposite direction.

Their focus was on the ocean and the dreams it inspired. They prayed for a propitious wind, and wished for safe passage for the merchant ships, which secured the harbour city's prosperity. The prayers on the summit survived and can be seen in the 10 red cliff inscriptions, dating from 1174 to 1266. Many more inscriptions are believed to have once existed.

As shown by ancient documents, local governors of the Song Dynasty would lead a group of officials

and members of the royal clan to make sacrificial offerings to a temple on the mountain every summer and winter. They wanted the monsoon to take the ships to their destinations safe and sound.

The Jiuri Mountain Wind-Praying Inscriptions is one of the 22 components of "Quanzhou: Emporium of the World in Song-Yuan China", which was inscribed onto the World Heritage List in 2021 during the ongoing 44th Session of the World Heritage Committee, hosted in Fuzhou, capital of Fujian province.

In the eyes of scholars, these precious stone inscriptions are not just a historical archive providing a reliable meteorological record.

"They also reflect the state power and a national-level system of the Song Dynasty to promote, manage and control maritime trade," says Fu Jing, deputy director at the Institute of Architectural History affiliated to the China Architecture Design and Research Group.

#### Growing ambition

As a person central to the drafting of documents for the World Heritage status bid, Fu, also a Quanzhou native, knows the importance of impressing the World Heritage Committee.

"The 22 components cannot be seen as 22 scattered spots," she explains. "They are closely linked to one another, functionally, spatially and culturally, and jointly exhibit the key attributes of Quanzhou's regional economic and social system shaped by the surging wave of world maritime trade."

The historic sites, now accorded World Heritage status, include administrative buildings, the city's infrastructure, such as city gates and walls, religious sites that marked multicultural communities, production sites for ceramics and iron, as well as a transportation network formed by bridges, docks and pagodas.

As Fu explains, a consensus was reached between the authorities and the general public during the Song Dynasty to make full use of maritime trade, because tense relations between the dynasty and its neighbours to the north made cross-border trading routes on land unstable. "The focus of development was thus shifted toward the ocean," she says.

After the Song Dynasty lost half of its territory and entered the Southern Song period (1127-1279), maritime trade became even more crucial to prolong its rule.

A historic opportunity came upon Quanzhou. From the 10th to 14th centuries, global maritime trade experienced a remarkable period of prosperity, a golden age.

Known as Zayton overseas, the city boomed and surpassed Guangzhou, in today's Guangdong province, to become the country's biggest harbour in the early 13th century. This upward trend continued into the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) as its Mongol rulers also upheld the national policy to support thriving maritime trade. "As the fulcrum in the East, Quanzhou functioned as an engine for trade across the Asian seas," Fu says.

As the 14th-century Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta once wrote: "The harbour of Zayton is among the biggest in the world, or rather the biggest."

#### Building of prosperity

In 1087, the Maritime Trade Office was set up by the Song Dynasty government in Quanzhou. Mixing present-day customs, administration of foreign trade licences, exchange for imported goods, and a reception agency for foreign diplomats, the office was extraordinarily busy. "Its establishment marked the official designation of Quanzhou as a national-level seaport for overseas trade," says Wang Bo, a researcher at the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. "On its best days, the office alone contributed about 7 percent of the country's total annual tax revenue during the Southern Song period, which is quite remarkable."

Nevertheless, none of it remains, and only several of today's street names roughly indicate its location. To further unveil the city's historical significance, and also to prepare for the bidding for the World Heritage status, Wang led a group of archaeologists to search for its ruins in 2019.

In spite of the mission's difficulty, Wang was surprised to find that spatial patterns of ancient Quanzhou rigidly followed feng shui theory and traditional Chinese urban design. In-depth and comprehensive research of these ideas, which reflect the relationship between the city's denizens and their environment, helped him to review how the city's layout was originally planned and, in 2020, finally dig out architectural ruins of a high-level ancient office building. Bricks were later unearthed with inscriptions to further prove it was the Maritime Trade Office.

"Thanks to this office, Quanzhou maintained a stable relationship with the overseas market," Wang says. "And as a reflection of Chinese philosophy, which has lasted for millennia, it is also a reminder for today's people to better protect our cultural heritage."

The similar working process also enabled his team to find and excavate the site of the Southern Clan Office in 2019, another agency crucial for maritime trade during the Song Dynasty.

The office was set up in 1102 in present-day Henan province to take care of royal kinsmen. After the fall of Henan to the Jurchen, the office, along with



Shihu Dock in Quanzhou.  
PHOTO: CHENG DONGDONG/CHINA DAILY



some members of the royal family, relocated to South China until it was finally relocated to Quanzhou in 1130.

Zhou Zhenping, deputy mayor of Quanzhou who is in charge of culture-related work, believes that it marked a pivotal moment in the history of Quanzhou. “The Song royal clan actively participated in social and business affairs in Quanzhou,” Zhou explains. “They helped the high-end markets of the city blossom, as consumers of spices and jewels, thus, greatly stimulated imports.

“Meanwhile, some became government officials, including head of the Maritime Trade Office, making great contributions to the development of the port and other infrastructure,” she says.

A bridge of trade

The tide still rises and falls, day after day, in front of the Estuary and Shihu stone docks, which no longer receive sailors from afar. The Liusheng and Wanshou pagodas remain, but today’s cargo ships do not need them to navigate.

Still, visiting these sites is like a pilgrimage to the past and a journey to reconstruct the full picture of a trade system.

For its protection, no motor vehicle is allowed to pass over Luoyang Bridge, about 10km away from downtown Quanzhou. It is quiet now, but it is easy for today’s visitors to imagine the glorious heyday of the 731m-long bridge with its 47 grand arches, and 968-year history.

“In its time, it was a super construction over the sea and represented the country’s highest level of bridge-building techniques and wisdom,” says Wu Yujuan, director of Quanzhou Cultural Heritage Conservation and Research Center.

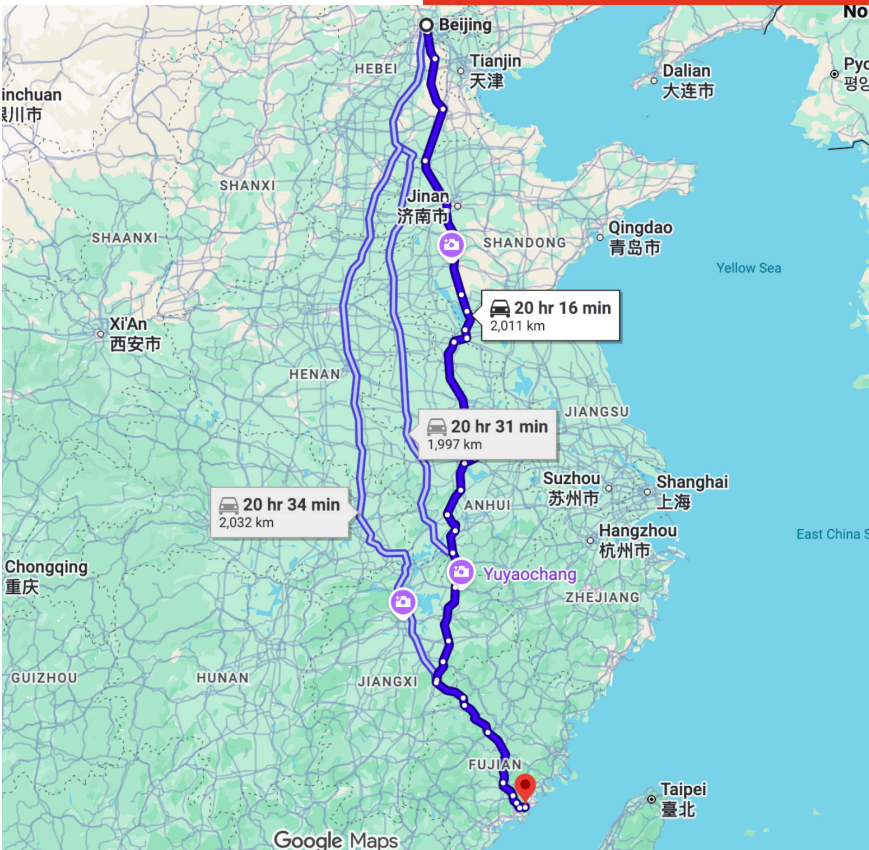
Wu says local people invented a method to cultivate oysters on the foundations of the bridge to cement the construction as glue. Consequently, in ancient times, fishing them from water was strictly prohibited by the local government.

Led by the government, construction of this transportation hub – connecting the port and hinterland – lasted six years. It involved participation of all levels of society, according to the stone steles written by great Song Dynasty calligrapher Cai Xiang, who then served as an official in Quanzhou. He recorded in minute detail how the bridge was planned and constructed, and what resources it took to finish this project.

Decades after Cai’s death, a temple was erected beside the bridge to honour him, which is still a place of worship today.

Oysters still thrive under the bridge. They do not need to function as a glue like their ancestors, and people today can finally enjoy them at the dining table.

The city’s lowliest living things once played a vital part in, quite literally, supporting Quanzhou’s grand maritime ambitions. Now, centuries later, their descendants provide sustenance for those that help maintain that heritage.



How to get there

Quanzhou is located some 2,011km (1,250 miles) away from Beijing.

There’re many regular direct domestic flights from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other major gateway cities of China to Quanzhou. A flight from Beijing, for example, to Quanzhou takes about three hours. Or you can take a flight from abroad and arrive at Xiamen Gaoqi International Airport. It takes 1½ hours to take drive from Xiamen airport to Quanzhou. High-speed train also shuttles between Xiamen and Quanzhou.

Tips

The old neighbourhood in downtown Quanzhou is very walkable, but it still needs a taxi ride to get to some spots like Luoyang Bridge. Get prepared for the humid and hot weather of Quanzhou during summer. Traditional marionette shows and local cuisine in special Southern Fujian flavour are also strongly recommended.

A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

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Kaiyuan Temple of Quanzhou.  
PHOTO: CHEN YINGJIE/CHINA DAILY





Kolkata's architecture reflects a seamless fusion of European and Indian styles, known as Indo-Saracenic architecture. Among these, the Marble Palace stands out with its neoclassical and baroque influence. PHOTO: THE STATESMAN



INDIA



## KOLKATA

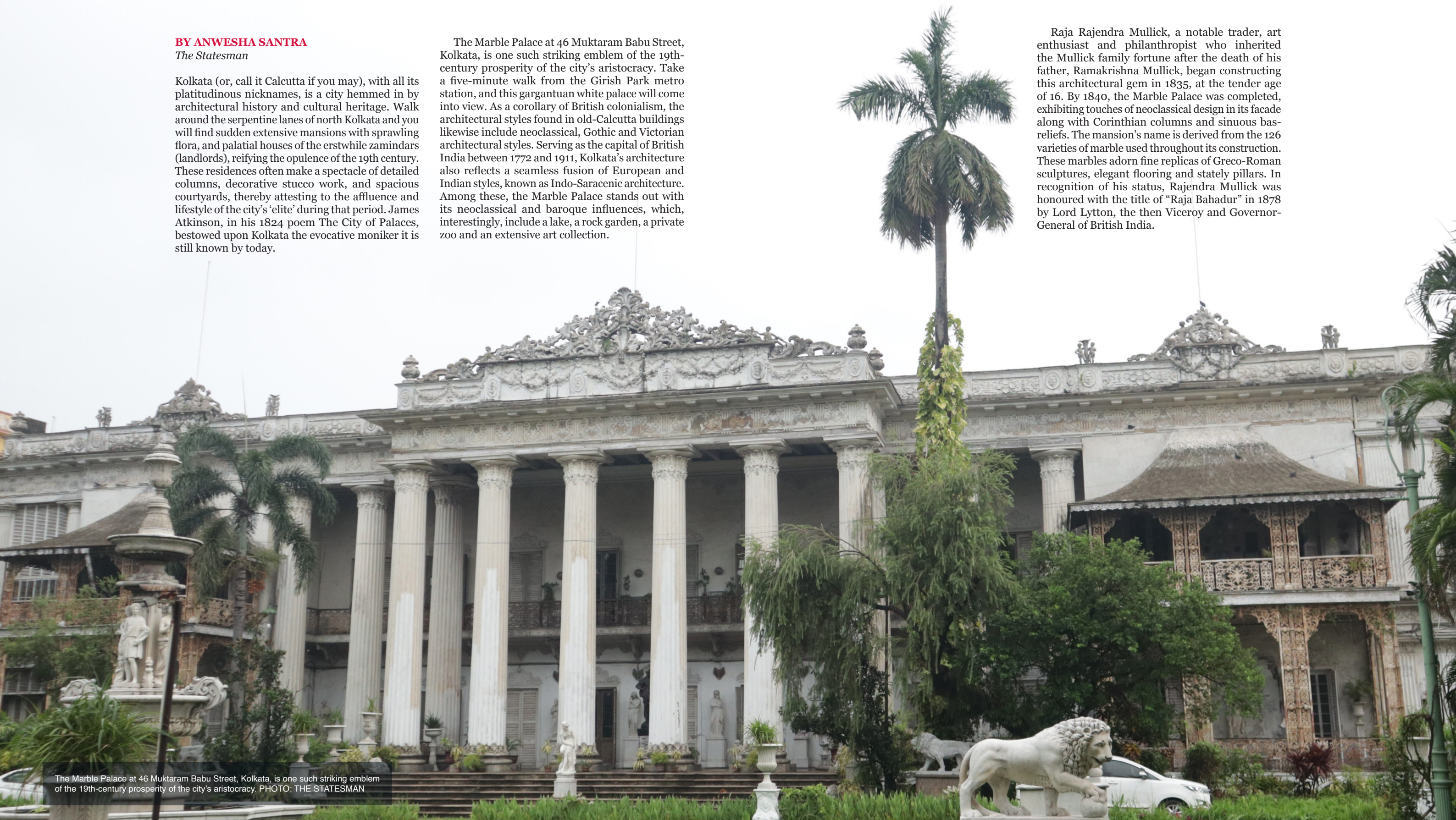
# A Raja's ode to marble

BY ANWESHA SANTRA  
*The Statesman*

Kolkata (or, call it Calcutta if you may), with all its platitudinous nicknames, is a city hemmed in by architectural history and cultural heritage. Walk around the serpentine lanes of north Kolkata and you will find sudden extensive mansions with sprawling flora, and palatial houses of the erstwhile zamindars (landlords), reifying the opulence of the 19th century. These residences often make a spectacle of detailed columns, decorative stucco work, and spacious courtyards, thereby attesting to the affluence and lifestyle of the city's 'elite' during that period. James Atkinson, in his 1824 poem *The City of Palaces*, bestowed upon Kolkata the evocative moniker it is still known by today.

The Marble Palace at 46 Mukhtaram Babu Street, Kolkata, is one such striking emblem of the 19th-century prosperity of the city's aristocracy. Take a five-minute walk from the Girish Park metro station, and this gargantuan white palace will come into view. As a corollary of British colonialism, the architectural styles found in old-Calcutta buildings likewise include neoclassical, Gothic and Victorian architectural styles. Serving as the capital of British India between 1772 and 1911, Kolkata's architecture also reflects a seamless fusion of European and Indian styles, known as Indo-Saracenic architecture. Among these, the Marble Palace stands out with its neoclassical and baroque influences, which, interestingly, include a lake, a rock garden, a private zoo and an extensive art collection.

Raja Rajendra Mullick, a notable trader, art enthusiast and philanthropist who inherited the Mullick family fortune after the death of his father, Ramakrishna Mullick, began constructing this architectural gem in 1835, at the tender age of 16. By 1840, the Marble Palace was completed, exhibiting touches of neoclassical design in its facade along with Corinthian columns and sinuous bas-reliefs. The mansion's name is derived from the 126 varieties of marble used throughout its construction. These marbles adorn fine replicas of Greco-Roman sculptures, elegant flooring and stately pillars. In recognition of his status, Rajendra Mullick was honoured with the title of "Raja Bahadur" in 1878 by Lord Lytton, the then Viceroy and Governor-General of British India.



The Marble Palace at 46 Mukhtaram Babu Street, Kolkata, is one such striking emblem of the 19th-century prosperity of the city's aristocracy. PHOTO: THE STATESMAN



The palace’s layout includes five main halls – Reception Hall, Painting Room, Sculpture Room, Billiards Room and Thakur Dalan (the place of worship for members of the family) – along with a music room and a ballroom. The Reception Hall displays an impressive assemblage of marble sculptures, antique vases, chandeliers and ornate furniture.

The art collection housed within the Marble Palace is sundry, emblazoning Victorian memorabilia, Belgian glassware, and works by artists such as Peter Paul Rubens, Raja Ravi Varma, Jan Van Goyen, Sassoferrato, John Opie, Titian, Bartolome Esteban Murillo and Piero del Pollaiolo. The mansion’s extensive collection also spans replicas of Italian Renaissance masterpieces, period furniture and a fascinating array of collectibles, including a teak statue of Queen Victoria.

The palace’s art collection includes 76 rare artworks imported from Italy and Belgium in 1830, such as Joshua Reynolds’ The Infant Hercules Strangling the Serpent and Venus and Cupid, along with Rubens’ The Marriage of St Catherine and The Martyrdom of St Sebastian. The ballroom’s candle chandeliers and 19th-century silvered glass balls add to the palace’s historic charm.

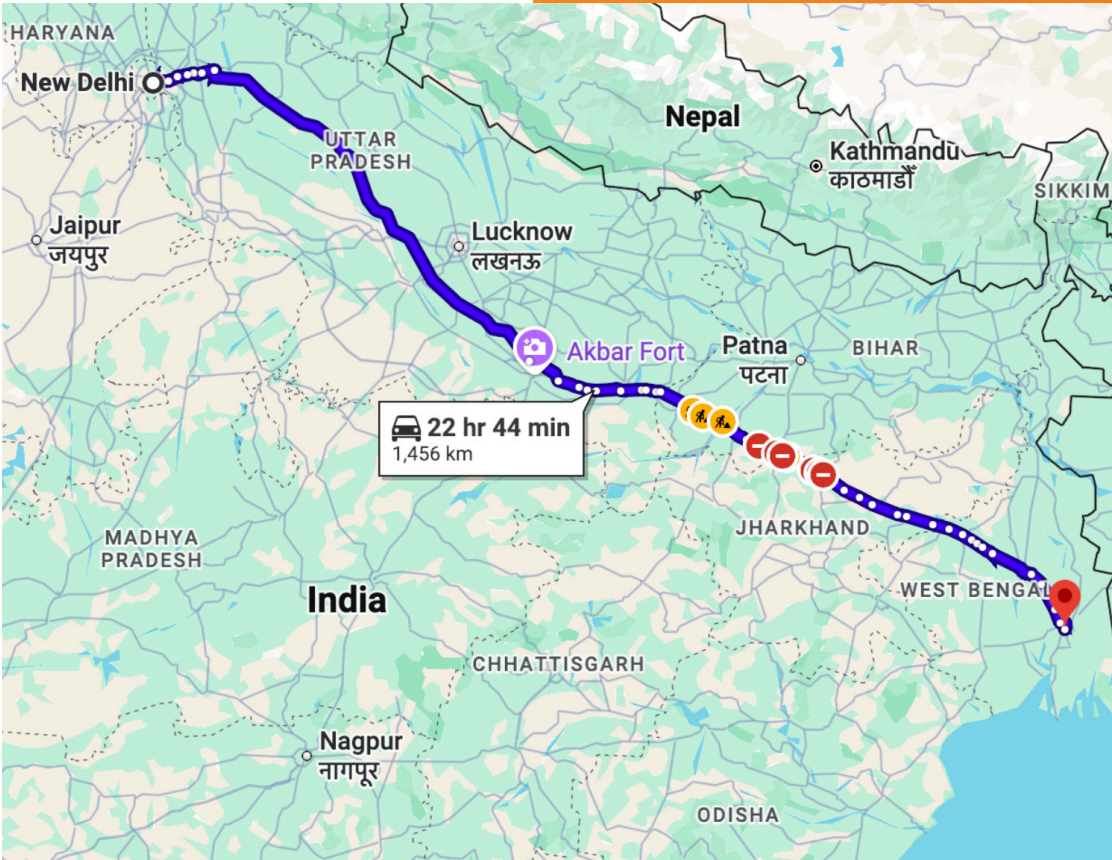
The palace’s design incorporates carvings reminiscent of those found in the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. Its grand hallways are adorned with sculptures depicting iconic figures such as Homer, Diana, Venus, Apollo, Praxiteles, Phidias and Moses.

Adding to its cultural significance, the palace serves as the evocative backdrop for Jean-Christophe Grangé’s acclaimed French novel, Le Vol des Cigognes.

The Music Room of the palace is graced by elegant statues of Wellington and Napoleon, while the ballroom retains its original 19th-century charm with candle chandeliers and silvered glass balls from the era’s disco ball collection. At the entrance, a large Japanese bronze vase greets visitors, and the walls are adorned with full-length Belgian glass mirrors, creating captivating illusions of expanded space. The expansive green lawns are dotted with statues representing various deities from different religions and beliefs. At the centre of the lawn stands a marble fountain featuring the famous statue of Leda and the Swan.

Nestled within the grounds of the Marble Palace is Nilmani Niketan, a zoo named in honour of Mullick’s father. Known as India’s first public zoo, it offers a unique focus on herbivorous animals, mirroring the dietary preferences of its owners. Visitors can admire myriad creatures, including porcupines, red-butt baboons, barking deer, hyacinth macaws, hornbills and magpies. Remarkably, this remains the only privately owned zoo in India.

Although the palace continues to serve as the private residence of the Mullick family’s descendants, guided tours are available. Caretakers provide insights into the property’s history, background, owners, and the extensive collection within.



## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

[CLICK HERE](#)

The Marble Palace in Kolkata is located 1,456km (904.7 miles) away from New Delhi.

The Marble Palace is conveniently located just a five-minute walk from the Girish Park metro station. The nearest airport to the Marble Palace is Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport in Dumdum, approximately 14km away.

Various transportation options are available from Dumdum to the Marble Palace. If you prefer to travel by train, the closest railway stations to the Marble Palace are Sealdah and Howrah, both of which are well-connected to major railway hubs. However, the mansion is closed on Mondays and Thursdays, and photography is prohibited inside its premises.

Although entry to this marble haven is free, you will require identity proof and a permit from the West Bengal Tourism Information Bureau, obtained one day in advance.



By 1840, the Marble Palace was completed, exhibiting touches of neoclassical design in its facade along with Corinthian columns and sinuous bas-reliefs. PHOTO: THE STATESMAN





The Goddess of the Oceans stands guard in front of the pagoda at Old Shanghai  
PHOTO: SYLVIANA HAMDANI/THE JAKARTA POST



# INDONESIA



## OLD SHANGHAI

# East Jakarta's tourism, culinary and religious destination

BY SYLVIANA HAMDANI

*The Jakarta Post*

Old Shanghai offers a rich diversity of cuisines and Instagrammable photo spots in an ancient China setting.

There are few hang-out places in East Jakarta. While people living in other parts of the capital are spoiled for choices, those living on the east side still want a nice place to sit back and relax while enjoying good food and drinks.

The new culinary centre, Old Shanghai, can now be an option. Located at the centre of Sedayu city Kelapa Gading superblock, the culinary centre offers a rich variety of cuisines in an ancient China setting.

“Old Shanghai is the new hidden gem of East Jakarta,” Ramadhani Yundarno Mahfudz, marketing communications officer of the culinary centre, said during a tour of the establishment.

The culinary centre is owned and managed by the developer Agung Sedayu Group. Its décor might remind you of another culinary centre by the developer, Pantjoran PIK in Pantai Indah Kapuk 1, North Jakarta.

Sprawling across a 14.5ha land area in the residential complex, the culinary centre is designed to resemble a Chinese imperial garden with Siheyuan structures dotting the area and a grand pagoda at its core.

There are three main entrances to Old Shanghai, named after the mascots of the establishment, which are Dragon, Phoenix and Tiger.

The main entrance, Dragon Gate, is designed to resemble the traditional Paifang structure, featuring tall stone pillars sculpted with Chinese mythical creatures.

As we enter from the main gate, we will immediately encounter the grand white statue of Tiang Shang Sheng Mu, also known as Mak Co or Goddess of the Oceans, towering over the open-air dining area.

“We have three (god/goddess) statues in the establishment, set up in collaboration with the Dana Paramita Foundation of the Indonesian Tridharma Council (YDPMTI),” the marketing communications officer said.

An altar, charity box and incense sticks are provided in front of each statue to allow Buddhists to pray to these deities.

“We position ourselves as a tourism, culinary, as well as Buddhist religious destination in East Jakarta,” Ramadhani said.



Kingdom: The golden throne on the fifth floor of the pagoda is a favourite photo spot at Old Shanghai. PHOTO: SYLVIANA HAMDANI/THE JAKARTA POST



Enter the dragon: The Dragon gate is the main entrance to Old Shanghai. On Jan. 21, 2023, Roy Kiyoshi (in yellow jacket) held a talk show about the Chinese zodiac at this gate. PHOTO: SYLVIANA HAMDANI/THE JAKARTA POST





Cool down: Goes Es Goyang Kenangan is a favourite dessert at Old Shanghai. PHOTO: SYLVIANA HAMDANI/THE JAKARTA POST

Culinary paradise

There are 80 tenants in Old Shanghai, which include food-and-beverage outlets, fashion stores, a grocery shop and a beauty salon.

Some of the restaurants are pretty famous, such as Mutiara Traditional Chinese Food, which serves iconic Hokkian Lomie and Sop Ikan Gurame (carp soup), Shu Guo Yin Xiang, which offers extra spicy Szechuan Mala hotpots, pork-bone soup and Ponggol Nasi Lemak, which provides Singapore-style rice dishes.

Besides these big names, Old Shanghai also features small-time food and beverage outlets, offering some of the country’s most legendary old-time dishes.

“Seventy-three of our tenants are SMEs (small-to-medium enterprises),” Ramadhani said.

“We want to support the local economy by facilitating local SMEs in our establishment.”

On that somewhat stifling afternoon, a queue was seen in front of Goes Es Goyang Kenangan, a traditional ice-cream peddler with a swinging wooden box that emits a tick-tack sound when working.

“Our ice cream is made in (the swinging wooden box), hence the name,” Dian, the attendant, said.

According to the attendant, the ice cream was initially peddled on Jakarta’s streets between the 1950s and 1970s. Today, the ice-cream brand is available at three locations in the capital, including Old Shanghai.

Among the 15 available flavours on their menu, avocado, strawberry and mung bean are the favourites.

“Customers love our fruit-flavoured ice creams as they’re actually made of fresh fruits,” Dian said. Another favourite among the SMEs in the culinary centre is the seafood omelette Hoy Tod!

“(Seafood omelettes) are classic culinary delights of Hokkian and Teochew origin,” Sakrie, the attendant, said.

The outlet usually sells 20-30 plates of their favourite dish, the double-egg oyster omelette, weekly.

“The number usually doubles on weekends,” Sakrie added.

Most of Old Shanghai’s cuisines are halal, marked by the No Pork No Lard sign in front of their outlets.

The prices of the food in this culinary centre start at 35,000 rupiah (S\$2.70).

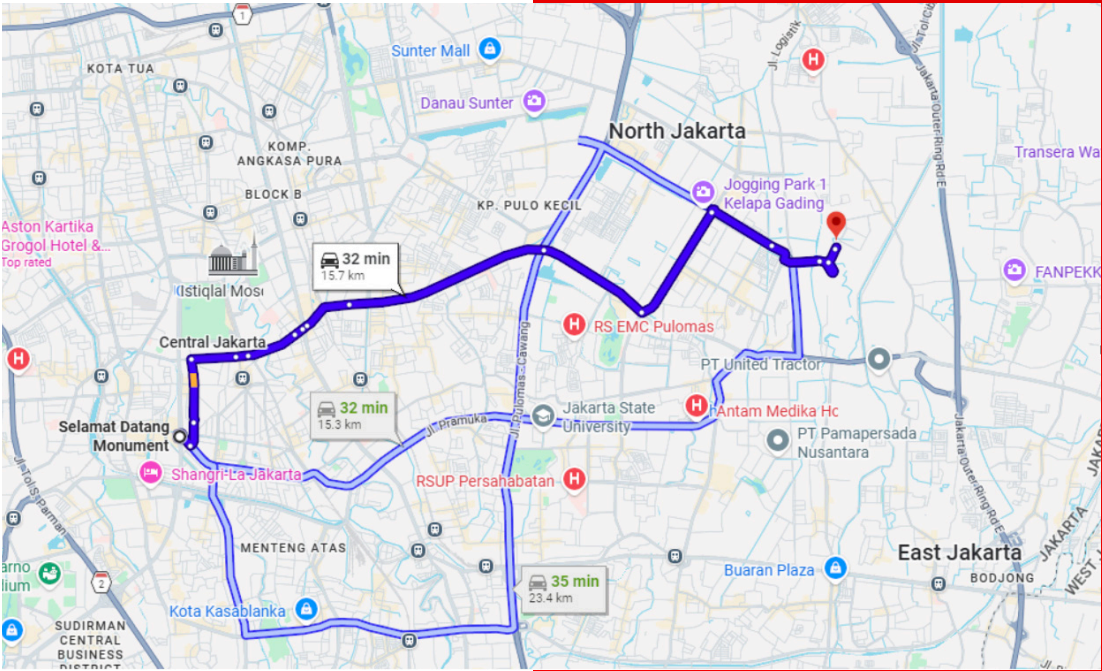
Preserving memories

That afternoon, a husband-and-wife couple was seen sipping cups of coffee near a pond facing the pagoda.

“This corner here (at Old Shanghai) truly resembles a summer palace that we’d once visited in Beijing,” Anita, the wife, reminisced.

Anita and her husband, who live in Duren Sawit, East Jakarta, claimed to be frequent visitors of the place. “We love the ambience here,” Anita said.

“Sometimes, we just come here to enjoy noodles and listen to the music.”



A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

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Old Shanghai presents live-music performances from 7pm to 9pm on weekdays and from 7pm to 10pm on weekends.

The 25m-high pagoda, nestled at the heart of the alfresco plaza, is a main attraction at Old Shanghai.

The coffee shop Croco by Monsieur Spoon occupies the pagoda’s first, second and third floors. On the fourth floor, you can rent an Oriental costume of your fancy, including the traditional Chinese outfits cheongsam and hanfu, the traditional Korean outfit hanbok or the traditional Japanese outfits kimono and yukata for personal-photo sessions.

The preferred photo spot in the pagoda is on the fifth floor, which offers a 360-degree view around Old Shanghai. The centrepiece on this floor is a gilded Dragon Throne guarded by a couple of stone lions on its left and right.

The establishment also offers two function rooms for meetings, family gatherings or Sangjits (betrothals) at the Court of Ruby and Jade Palace just across from the pagoda.

The 100 sq m Court of Ruby can easily accommodate 80 people, while the 55 sq m Jade Palace can accommodate about 40 people.

Visitors can enjoy free Wi-Fi throughout the culinary centre.

You can also bring your dogs or cats while dining at Old Shanghai. “(Your pets) should wear a diaper and a leash,” Ramadhani said. “They’re allowed to sit on chairs but not on tables.”

Suppose you want to take home some souvenirs. In that case, you can get some adorable hats, handbags and fashion items by Indonesian illustrators at Sovlo, as well as origami-style handicrafts of Jakarta’s bemo (three-wheeled vehicle) and TransJakarta buses at Papercraft in the culinary centre.





Waterfalls that appear only when it rains are seen on the surface of Byobu-Iwa Rock, a popular rock climbing spot, on the path towards Karasawa Cirque. PHOTO: AKIKO INOUE/THE JAPAN NEWS



JAPAN





Happon Pond reflects the Hakuba mountain range in Hakuba, Nagano Prefecture.  
PHOTO: AKIKO INOUE/THE JAPAN NEWS

## NAGANO

# Hakuba, famed for powder snow in winter, offers stunning mountain views in summer

BY AKIKO INOUE

*Japan News Staff Writer*

Located in northern Nagano Prefecture, Hakuba is known among skiers most of all for its powder snow in winter. However, it is during the summer when its mountain range takes the spotlight.

Happon Pond in Hakuba Village offers a mirror image of the Hakuba mountain range reflected on its surface, making it a popular spot for sightseers.

Only the perfect combination of calm wind and clear weather allows the surface of the water to reflect the mountain range with little distortion, creating an illusion of the pond floating 2,000m above sea level.

On the summer morning when the main photo accompanying this article was taken, the view lasted only around 30 minutes, after which the mountains disappeared completely under mist.

Happon Pond is a natural body of water located on the Happon-one ridge, which extends from the summit of Mt. Karamatsu (2,696m above sea level). The area is famous for its abundant variety of alpine flora during the summer, including many species native to the area. It is designated as a natural monument of the prefecture.

To reach Happon Pond, visitors can ride ski lifts halfway, at which point there is a light, 1½- to two-hour hike up an about 200m incline. There are two paths leading to the pond, both of which are well maintained, but a pair of good hiking shoes is recommended.

From Happon Pond, a mountain path leads up to Mt. Karamatsu, which takes an additional three hours of climbing to get to. There are some snowy spots along the way, which act as rest stops. From the summit, climbers are rewarded with views of the Northern Japanese Alps. It is advisable to be equipped with good trekking gear, since the path includes some rocky areas and the weather changes frequently.

Hakuba Village has many hot springs and campgrounds, making it a great place to recharge your tired legs after the long walk down from Happon Pond. It's also perfect for enjoying a barbecue in nature. Trains are available to the village from JR Matsumoto Station, which is about 2½ hours by train from Shinjuku Station in Tokyo.



Clouds rise from valleys between mountains, creating a view like a river flow in the Karasawa area. PHOTO: AKIKO INOUE/THE JAPAN NEWS



Mountain rocks appear bright red at dawn in Karasawa Cirque.  
PHOTO: AKIKO INOUE/THE JAPAN NEWS



Stunning Karasawa Cirque

The burning-red colour of the mountain rocks complements the blue-grey hue of the dawn sky.

Located at an altitude of 2,300m in the Northern Japanese Alps in Nagano Prefecture, Karasawa Cirque is known for its view at daybreak, drawing many keen viewers during the hiking season.

Karasawa Cirque is a U-shaped valley carved out of ancient glaciers. It is surrounded by famous peaks over 3,000m high in the Northern Alps, as it is on the major mountain trail leading to Mt Oku-Hotakadake and Mt Kita-Hotakadake, both of which are popular summits among avid hikers.

One October morning, the temperature in Karasawa Cirque was still below 0 deg C, and the dark sky was gradually brightening. Clouds crossed the eastern ridge of the mountains and quietly flowed into the valley.

The western side of the mountain wall suddenly turned bright red. It looked as if the mountains were burning. Cheers were heard from the hikers who had gathered to see the spectacle of nature.

The show did not last long, however. Within a few minutes, clouds rose and completely covered the area in a white mist, with less than 10m of visibility.

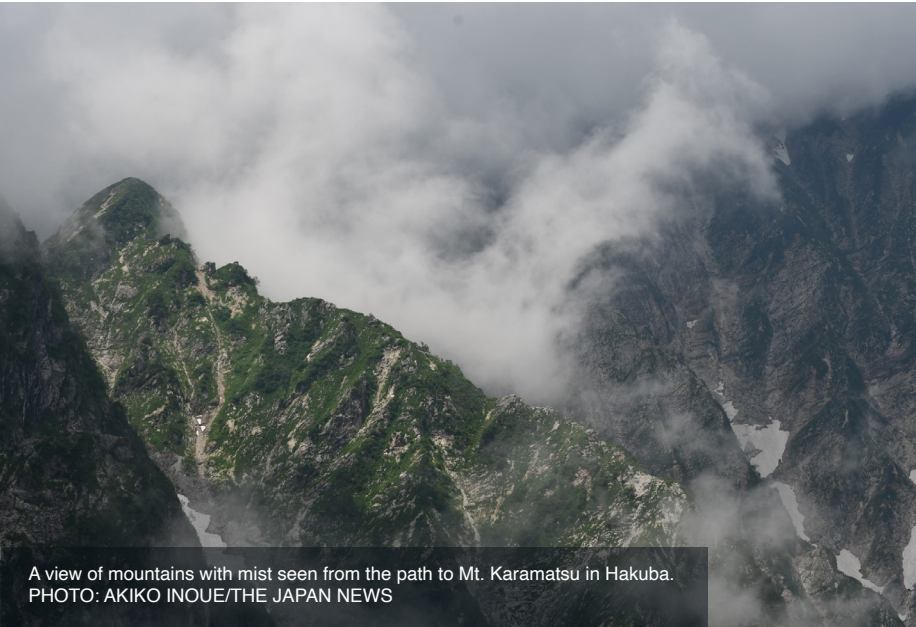
Seeing such a spectacle is a reward for those who endure at least six to seven hours of hiking over about 15km. Enjoying the scene also requires some luck, as precarious mountain weather often obscures the view of the peaks with thick clouds or rain.

There are a few paths to get to Karasawa Cirque, although the major routes are the ones connecting with Kamikochi, a popular tourist destination in the region.

On the paths between Karasawa Cirque and Kamikochi, which run along the Azusa River, hikers can enjoy a variety of scenery including a clear flowing river, rocky mountains and marshlands. In the autumn, yellow leaves add even more colour.

Mountain huts dot the trails. In the Karasawa Cirque area, two mountain lodges are available for accommodation as well as camp sites. Submitting a mountain climbing registration form in advance is required to get to the area.

In the Kamikochi area, which is in Chubusangaku National Park, private transportation is not allowed. Direct buses from Tokyo to Kamikochi, including overnight buses, are available. If travelling by train, buses from JR Matsumoto Station and ALPICO Shin-Shimashima Station operate to Kamikochi.

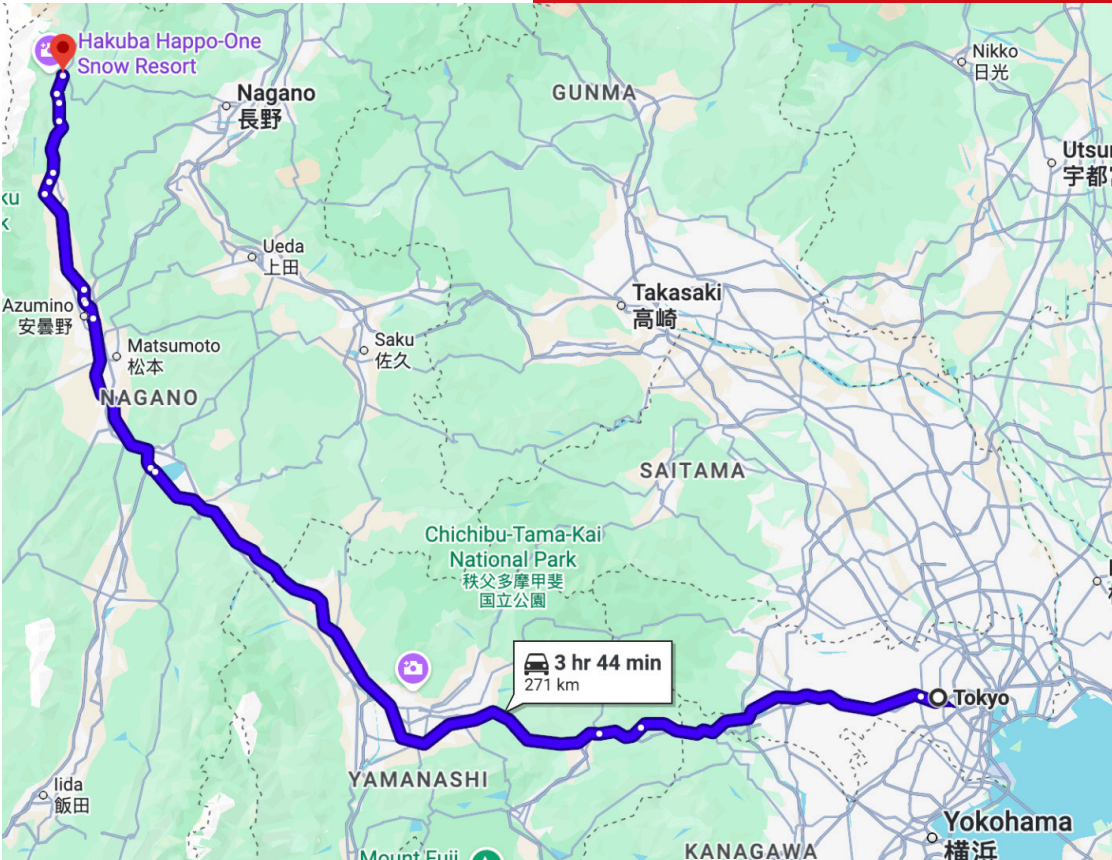


The entire area is closed for winter from around mid-November to mid-April every year.

Mountain accidents

With Covid-19-related restrictions ended, many people have gone climbing and hiking on the mountains, and a number of accidents have been reported.

With intense summer heat, there have been “many cases possibly related to dehydration and heatstroke” in Nagano Prefecture, according to the prefectural police. “It is important to be well-equipped and to plan thoroughly, for instance by carrying a physical map and not relying solely on phone apps.”



Hakuba is located 271km (168 miles) from Tokyo.

To get to Hakuba in Nagano, Japan, most travellers fly into Tokyo's Narita or Haneda airports and take a 3.5 to 5.5-hour transfer.

One can also hop on the Shinkansen (bullet train) to Nagano, then take an express bus, or take a direct resort shuttle bus from the airport.

For those travelling with large ski bags or a group, a direct airport-to-resort bus removes the hassle of carrying gear when transferring between train platforms. There is the Nagano Snow Shuttle, which operates direct shared coaches from Narita and Haneda directly to your accommodation or the Hakuba Hoppo Bus Terminal. You can check routes and book on the Nagano Snow Shuttle website.

For a no-transfer journey if departing directly from central Tokyo, travellers can take the JR Azusa Limited Express train from Shinjuku Station to Hakuba Station. The journey takes roughly 3.5 to 4 hours.

For those on a strict budget, highway buses are the cheapest way to travel.

A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

[CLICK HERE](#)





LAOS

This undated photo released by the Australia National University on October 19, 2016 shows an aerial view of Laos' mysterious Plain of Jars. PHOTO: STR/VARIOUS SOURCES/AFP





PHOTO (also the lead photo): This undated photo released by the Australia National University on October 19, 2016 shows an aerial view of Laos' mysterious Plain of Jars. PHOTO: STR/VARIOUS SOURCES/AFP

## XIENG KHUANG

# The enduring mystery of Laos' Plain of Jars

**BY KHONESAVANH LATSAPHAO**  
*Vientiane Times*

The varying sizes of the numerous stone vessels scattered throughout the Plain of Jars in Laos' Xieng Khuang province are something of an enigma to people puzzling over their origins.

They differ in height from tall, medium to short, while some have thick sides and others are thin, but the one thing they have in common is that they are all made of stone.

Groups of the so-called jars can be found in hills, woods and on flat land. Some contain about 150, while other groupings consist of about 300.

The jar sites contain large carved stone vessels, stone discs, secondary burial sites, tombstones, quarries and funerary objects dating from 500 BCE to 500 CE.

The jars and associated elements are the most prominent evidence of the Iron Age civilisation when they were made and used until the end of this era in about 500 CE.

At a meeting held in Azerbaijan, UNESCO added the Plain of Jars, known locally as Thong Hai Hin, to its list of World Heritage Sites.

This was a major triumph for the country, as Lao officials have worked for 20 years to get the Plain of Jars recognised by UNESCO.

The expectation now is that the Plain of Jars will become an even bigger tourist attraction.

The Plain of Jars is located on a plateau and is named for the more than 2,100 tubular-shaped megalithic stone jars that are believed to have been used for funerary practices in the Iron Age, according to UNESCO.

Some people think that the jars were made in different sizes depending on whether they belonged to wealthy or poor families.

But an official at the provincial Information, Culture and Tourism Department, Mr Phousavanh Vorasing, told Vientiane Times that was not the case.

"According to what we know, the makers of the jars cut the rock according to what they wanted.



This photo, taken in October 2004, shows tourists walking past the remains of a prehistoric stone jar believed to have been broken during US aerial bombing in the Vietnam War era, at Site 1 of the Plain of Jars. PHOTO: AFP



If they chose a large rock, they would spend more time making the vessel than if they used a smaller rock,” he said.

The biggest jar is 3.16m high and is located at the Plain of Jars Site No. 2, or Thong Hai Hin Nako, in Phaxay district, about 26km from the provincial capital Phonesavanh.

The jars at this site are situated on two adjacent hills. Access is easy because the road is paved.

Travelling from Phonesavanh on National Road D1 to Phaxay district, visitors will see a symbol at km 9, from where it is another 17km to reach the site itself.

The ancient stone jars are scattered throughout the districts of Paek, Phaxay, Phoukoud and Kham.

The Plain of Jars comprises about 80 distinct sites but Laos is including only 11 of these in the official World Heritage Site because they have the highest concentration of jars.

Some can also be found in Phoukhoun district in Luang Prabang province, which borders Xieng Khuang province.

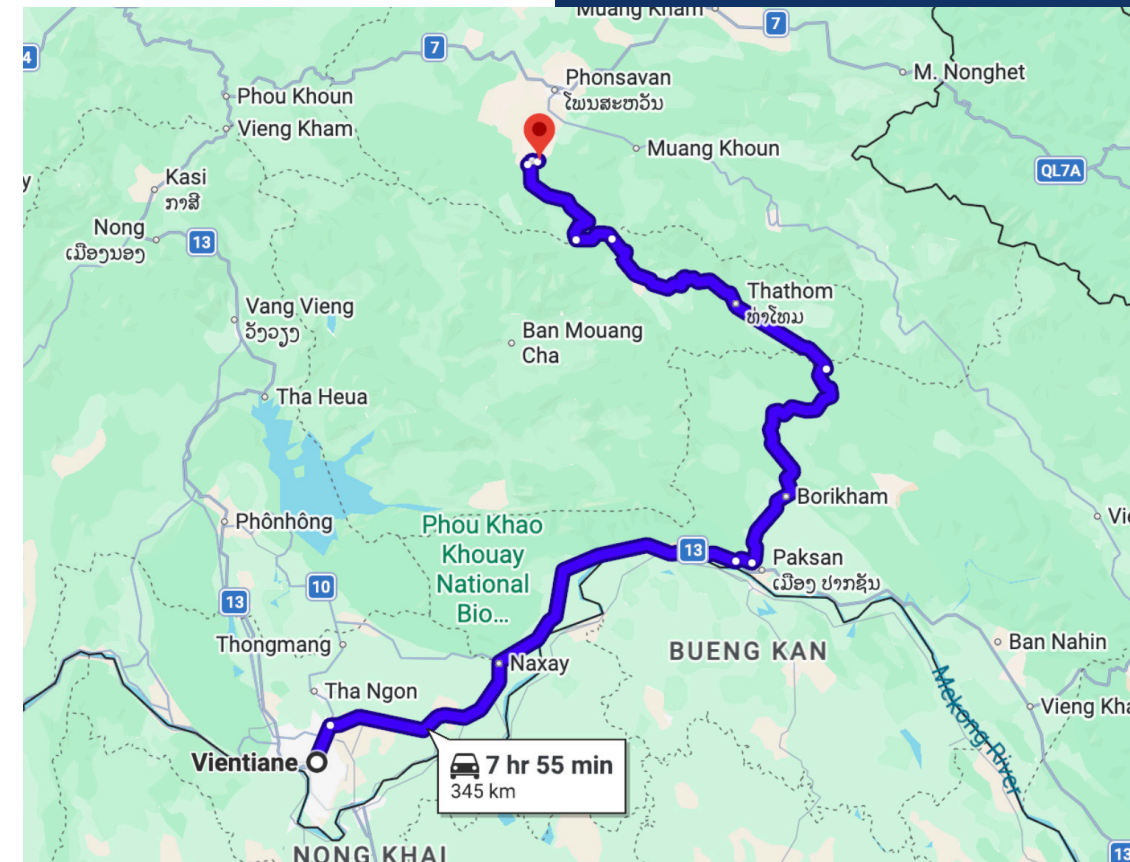
Tour guides can take tourists to the 11 sites. Some of these are not far from towns but it will take all day to visit the more remote sites.

By road it takes about six hours to reach Xieng Khuang province from Vientiane. The route through Borikhamxay is much shorter than travelling on the winding and mountainous Road 13 North through Phoukhoun.

On July 6, the World Heritage Committee meeting also inscribed another six cultural sites on UNESCO’s World Heritage List.

These sites were the Dilmun Burial Mounds in Bahrain, the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape in Australia, Archaeological Ruins of Liangzhu City in China, Jaipur City in Rajasthan, India, Ombilin Coal Mining Heritage of Sawahlunto in Indonesia, and the Mozu-Furuichi Kofun Group: Mounded Tombs of Ancient Japan.

The UNESCO inscription means that the Plain of Jars is Laos’ third World Heritage Site. The old town of Luang Prabang in Luang Prabang province was inscribed in 1995, followed by Vat Phou and associated Ancient Settlements within the Champassak Cultural Landscape in 2001.



The Plain of Jars, near Phonsavan in the Xiengkhuang Province, is located 345km (214 miles) from Vientiane.

To get to the Plain of Jars, travel to Phonsavan, the provincial capital of Xieng Khouang, Laos, via flights from Vientiane or buses/minivans from Vientiane or Luang Prabang, then hire local transport (tuktuk, minivan, or guide) to visit the main sites (Sites 1, 2, 3) which are spread out but accessible from town, always staying on marked paths due to unexploded ordnance (UXO).

## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

[CLICK HERE](#)



This photo taken in October 2004, shows a pre-historic stone jar sitting on a hillside above a bomb crater from the Vietnam War era, at Site 1 of the Plain of Jars in Laos. PHOTO: AFP





## MALAYSIA

The rise of the old streets raises questions: Will it become another commercially unbalanced heritage site, or can it forge a new path amidst numerous precedents? PHOTO: SIN CHEW DAILY





Kluang features a total of 16 stone lions across its historic streets. PHOTO: SIN CHEW DAILY

## KLUANG

# A revival of heritage and community spirit

**REPORTED AND PHOTO  
BY PEH HUI KEE**

*Sin Chew Daily*

In recent years, the mention of Kluang in Johor no longer conjures just images of Gunung Lambak, trains, and coffee but also stone lions and old streets. This refers to Jalan Ismail and Jalan Lambak, two rows of pre-war buildings situated next to the railway. Adorned with variously posed stone lions on their parapets, these structures have withstood the ravages of war, experienced bustling activity, and remained quiet for years. Recently, they have awakened.

As the stone lions guarding these old streets are immortalised in books, paintings, and postcards, the stories of their streets begin to unfold. These tales represent the memories of a generation in Kluang, fragments of a small town's history. The distilled sentiment brings people together, drawing them back to these streets to appreciate their beauty, making Kluang feel different. This renewal may even foster a greater sense of belonging and identity among the locals.



The 16 stone lions along Kluang's old streets each display unique expressions. PHOTO: SIN CHEW DAILY

The rise of the old streets raises questions: Will it become another commercially unbalanced heritage site, or can it forge a new path amidst numerous precedents?

“Refined, elegant, noble,” describes Soon Fook Seng, a cultural historian, of Kluang's old street architecture. Located on Jalan Ismail and Jalan Lambak, these well-preserved historic buildings were constructed between the 1920s and 1930s. Sun's vision of refinement, elegance, and nobility is reflected in the architectural elements – grape clusters, floral garlands, and avian bas-reliefs, as well as tiles adorned with floral and magpie motifs, each carrying symbolic meaning. The ancestral hall names inscribed reveal family roots, making these designs “speak”, conveying messages.

Historically, Kluang developed into a town after the railway opened in the 1910s, with the rubber industry driving the economy. The settlement initially clustered along the north-south railway line, expanding from the train station towards the east, extending towards the Mengkibol River and Gunung Lambak.

Many buildings in Kluang display construction dates; Jalan Ismail and Jalan Lambak were built in the 1920s and 1930s. After the post-war period in the 1940s, the town experienced significant development in the 1950s, expanding along Jalan Mersing. As the population grew, the commercial centre gradually shifted north to Haji Manan. From the architectural styles, Kluang's development resembles tree rings, with layers radiating outwards.

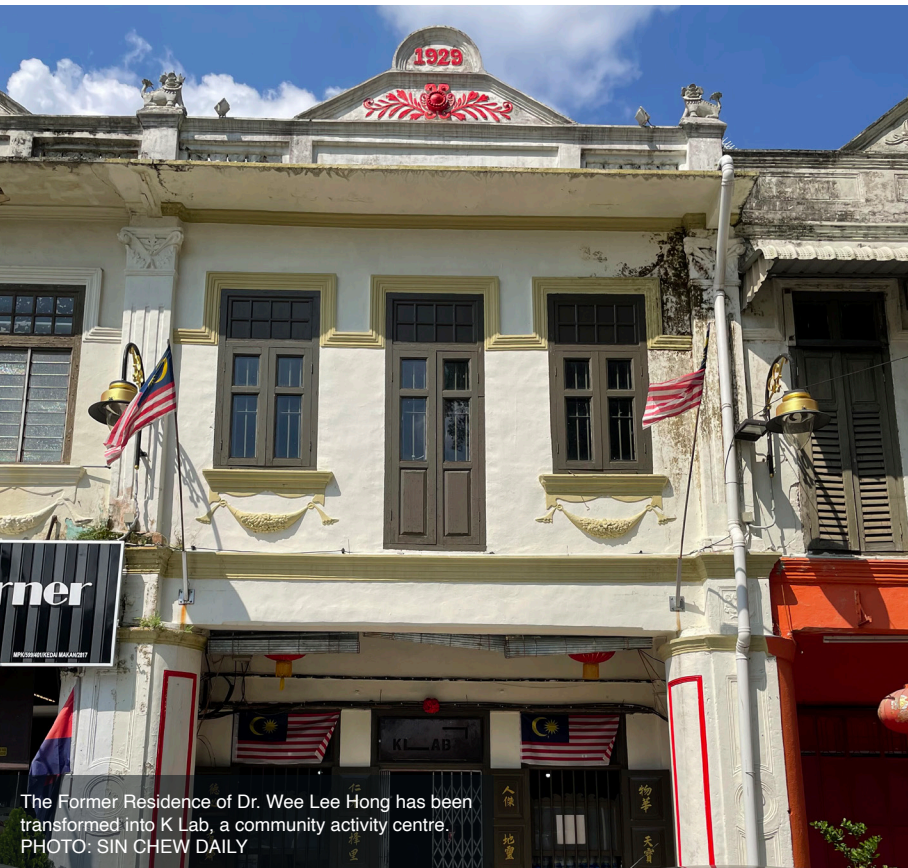
Speaking of the old streets, Sun leads us to the Eng Choon Association next to the Chinese Primary School on Jalan Ismail, where murals depict his elementary school days. Born in the 1950s, Sun considers himself a “child of the old streets”. Though not born on that street, his life revolves around it, from attending school and running a bookstore to now promoting guided tours of the old street.

Even though he lived on the old street, it wasn't until his 40s or 50s that he became curious about the stone lions on the parapets of those two rows of shops. Perhaps meeting them day and night, many locals still may not have noticed those stone lions. His dedicated promotion of the old street began around 2010.

To understand this, we must look at the broader context of old street culture across Malaysia. In 2008, Penang and Malacca were jointly listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Nearby, Johor Bahru Chinese Heritage Museum opened in 2009, transforming Jalan Tan Hiok Nee into a cultural street. By 2012, with the rise of social media, the mural craze in Penang's George Town swept across Malaysia.

In 2010, Sun was invited by the Lim Association to design an old street tour. Subsequently, local and Singaporean groups visited, and each time he hosted, he repeated the same stories. Someone suggested, “Can't remember so much, could you write it down?” This struck him profoundly. In 2012, as president of the Kluang Literary and Art Association, he proposed the “Writing Kluang” project, systematically researching and documenting local history.





Over the past decade, Sun diligently interviewed locals, recording the history of buildings, families, and social activities through oral history. He believes these interviewees are the emotional participants in history. Sometimes during guided tours, visitors’ questions would spark deeper research, making him feel that the old street’s history is inexhaustible. The challenge is, while many narrate stories, few translate them into written form. To date, Sun has compiled his findings into three books.

The central development history of Kluang reflects the shifting memories of different generations. For Sun’s generation around 60s and 70s, their school and leisure times were centred around the old street. For those in their 40s and 50s, their old street memories are mostly of post-school snacks at roadside stalls, with other consumer activities later migrating across Jalan Mersing. For the younger generation born in the 1980s and 1990s, their youth was largely spent in the Haji Manan area. Thus, the old street isn’t a memory for everyone.

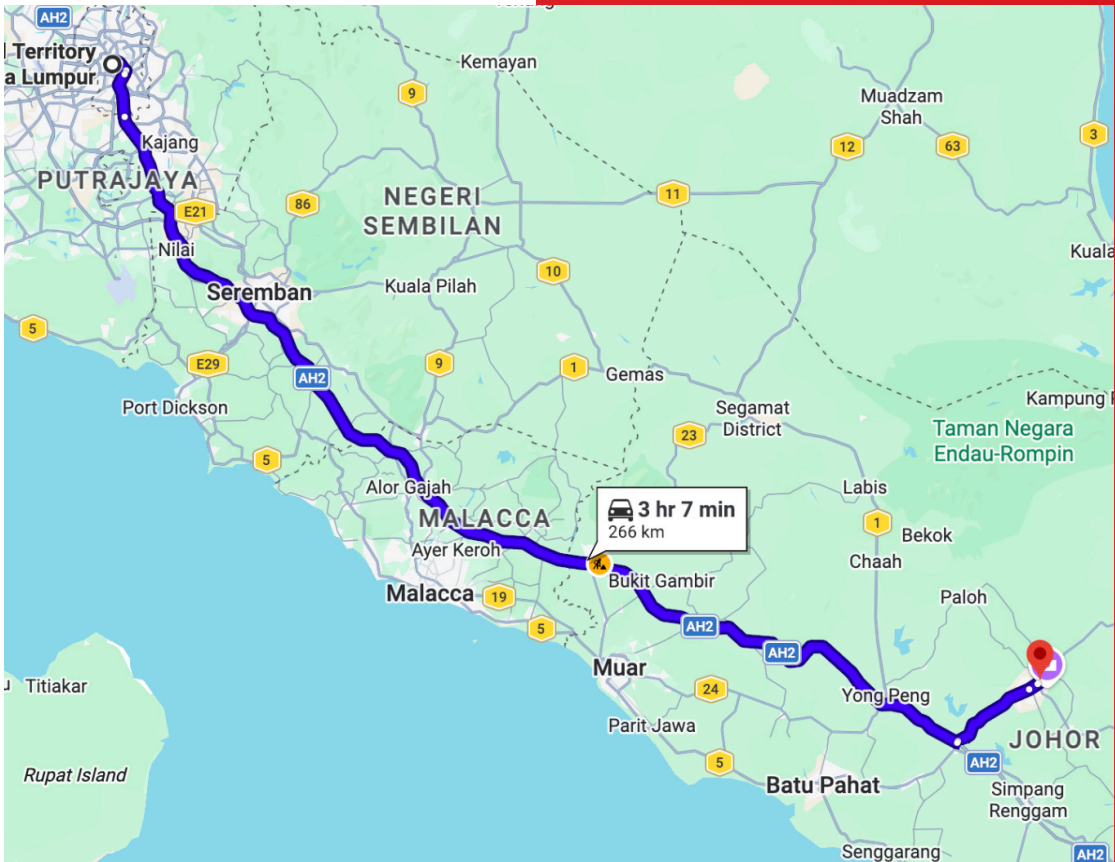
Quoting Sun, the old street may not be a memory for the younger generation. While the “speaking” buildings narrate not only fragments of the town’s development history but also the past of their grandparents. He believes that understanding the past is essential for moving forward.

What has fuelled the revival of Kluang’s old streets? According to research by Tan Kian Fatt, a PhD student in Chinese Studies at New Era University College, the concept of the “old street” began taking shape with the 2013 mid-autumn festival carnival organised by then-MP Liew Chin Tong’s team. In 2018, then Mengkibol Assemblyman Chew Chong Sin launched the “Lembaran Johor Tengah” strategy platform, further branding the old street as a distinctive tourism spot.

Chew’s office director, Angel Teo, shares that since 2018, they have organised “Old Street Imprints” activities, inviting local and international artists to document Kluang’s historic buildings through vernacular architecture drawings (Vernadoc). Some works are displayed on Jalan Lambak at Kluang Days. The team also established K Lab Kluang at No. 16 Jalan Ismail, the former residence of Dr Wee Lee Hong, as a community activity centre.

The beautification and enhancement of the old street, new shops replacing swiftlet houses, locals returning to “yumcha” (drinking culture). Tourists coming to spend have gradually revitalised the old street. Today’s old street retains clan associations, long-standing shops, and newer trendy Hainanese coffee shops and Western-style cafes.

Crucially, regardless of use or interior renovation, the exteriors of these two rows of buildings are now gazetted and must preserve their historical appearance. Angel Teo emphasises that old buildings and new businesses need not conflict; what’s important is that the younger generation recognises the value of historical buildings, understanding that once demolished, they cannot be reconstructed.



The distance from Kuala Lumpur to Kluang in the state of Johor is 266km (165 miles).

To get to Kluang’s Old Streets, you’ll head to the town centre in Johor, Malaysia, near the historic Kluang Railway Station (the new one serves the KTM/ETS) where the vibrant street art alleys, like the Kluang Street Art Alley (near Jalan Mada), are located, accessible by car, bus, or the convenient train from KL or Johor Bahru.

## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

[CLICK HERE](#)





## MALAYSIA

Where the river meets the canopy. There is nothing quite like looking out into a millions-of-years-old rainforest and waiting to see what looks back. PHOTO: THE STAR





DANUM VALLEY

# A journey into Borneo’s ancient heart

BY PHILIP GOLINGAI  
The Star

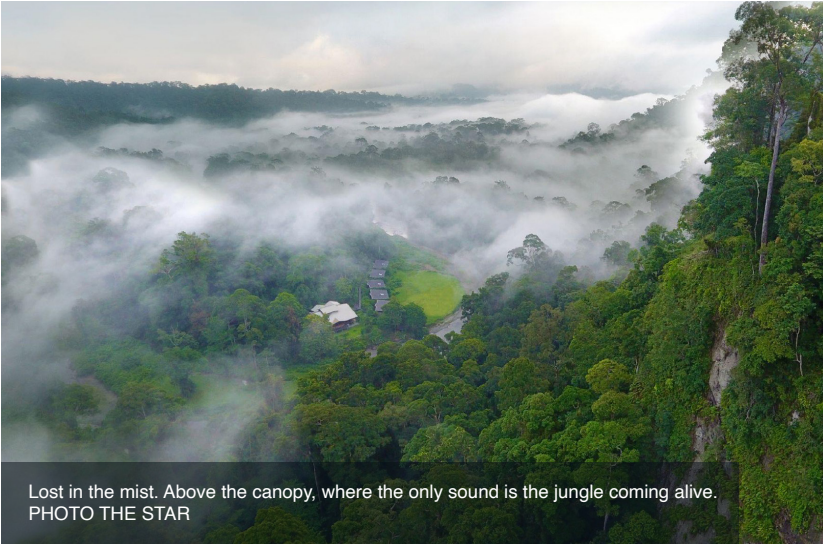
Imagine the skyscrapers in Hong Kong. Imagine that the steel, concrete and glass buildings are made of trees from a 130-million-year-old rainforest. Imagine that the inhabitants are orangutans, pygmy elephants and hornbills.

That’s how I felt when I entered Danum Valley, a 438 sq km forest reserve in Sabah, Malaysia. Sabah is on Borneo, the third-largest island in the world.

Danum Valley is populated by the tallest rainforest trees, with the largest towering at 100 metres. It is one of the world’s oldest rainforests. It is home to over 100 species of mammals, 300 types of birds and thousands of insects.

Most guests come to Danum Valley to experience pristine tropical lowland forests with its diverse flora and fauna, explained Calixtus Laudi, the operations manager of Borneo Rainforest Lodge, a cosy and luxurious eco-resort located in the heart of the reserve.

“When guests think of Danum Valley, they think of primary forests and wildlife such as orangutans, the Bornean gibbons, red leaf monkeys and pygmy elephants,” Calixtus said.



“It also has historical value. The previous settlers, the Sugpan tribe, lived nomadically within Danum as recently as 250 years ago. They depended on the forest for their survival.”

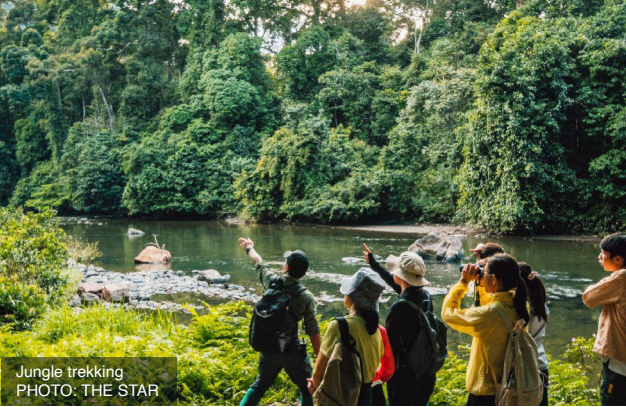
According to the Sugpan people’s traditions, their dead are buried on cliffs so the spirits can be as close to heaven as possible.

Calixtus cautioned me that Danum Valley is not a zoo. A guest is not guaranteed to see an orangutan or pygmy elephant.

I was lucky during my mildly challenging hike on the Coffin Cliff Trail. My group saw a teenage orangutan, which the guide from Borneo Rainforest Lodge said had yet to be identified.

Usually, you will smell the orangutan before you see it. It has a strong, pungent scent which you can smell even though it is up on a 60m tree.

I joked that it thought we humans were smelly. Either alerted by our pungent smell or our movement on the hiking trail, the orangutan swung away tree after tree. We, however, were quick enough to capture it on our smartphones.



On previous Danum Valley trips, I was fortunate to stumble into a herd of pygmy elephants crossing the gravel road. The advice is not to get out of the 4WD vehicle and behave like tourists – snapping photographs – as that might startle the world’s smallest elephants.

It was like striking the nature jackpot to see the orangutan and pygmy elephant in the wild.

So far, I’ve not been lucky enough to see sun bears.

My 1.7km hike on the Coffin Cliff Trail was insightful. The guide’s jungle interpretation made me appreciate the ecosystem.

The guide described the stratification in the jungle, dominated by emergent trees as tall as 60m to 80m – the equivalent of 15 storeys – and the survival of the trees and plants underneath depending on which absorbs the most sunlight and rain.

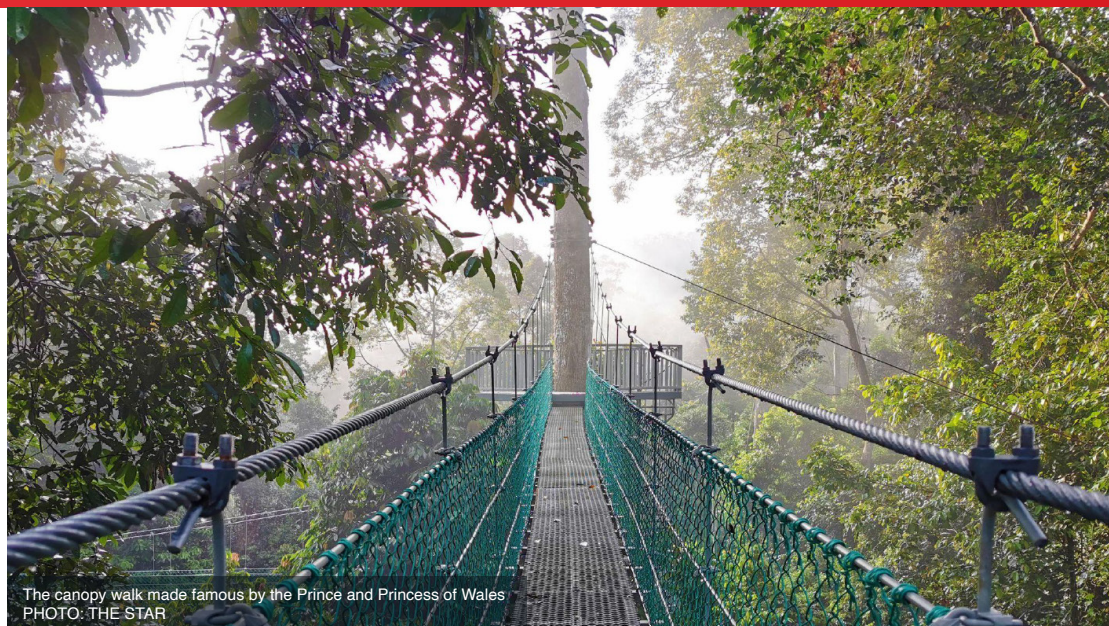


“The higher the tree, the higher its chance to get sunlight and rainwater and, therefore, dominate its surroundings. That means that trees and plants which live under these tall trees have limited chances of growing,” he said.

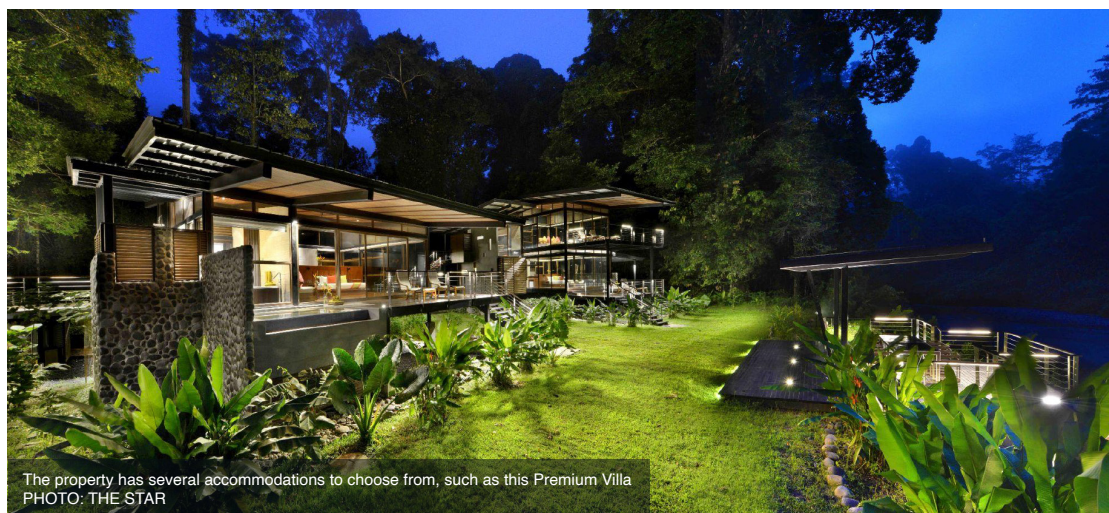
After the hike, I returned to the award-winning lodge with 30 luxurious chalets. It was an exclusive experience, as only about 60 guests were allowed daily.

It was a luxurious stay in the lodge in the middle of the jungle. But what makes it an award-winning accommodation is the staff.





The canopy walk made famous by the Prince and Princess of Wales  
PHOTO: THE STAR



The property has several accommodations to choose from, such as this Premium Villa  
PHOTO: THE STAR

Borneo Rainforest Lodge has the Sabahan's genuine and warm-hearted hospitality. More importantly, it has five-star guides with decades of experience.

They can narrate how the fig and tree will eventually – through decades of battle – try to eliminate each other to survive.

Another highlight of the trip was the canopy walk made world famous by Prince William and his wife, Catherine Middleton, when they visited Danum Valley as part of their honeymoon destinations.

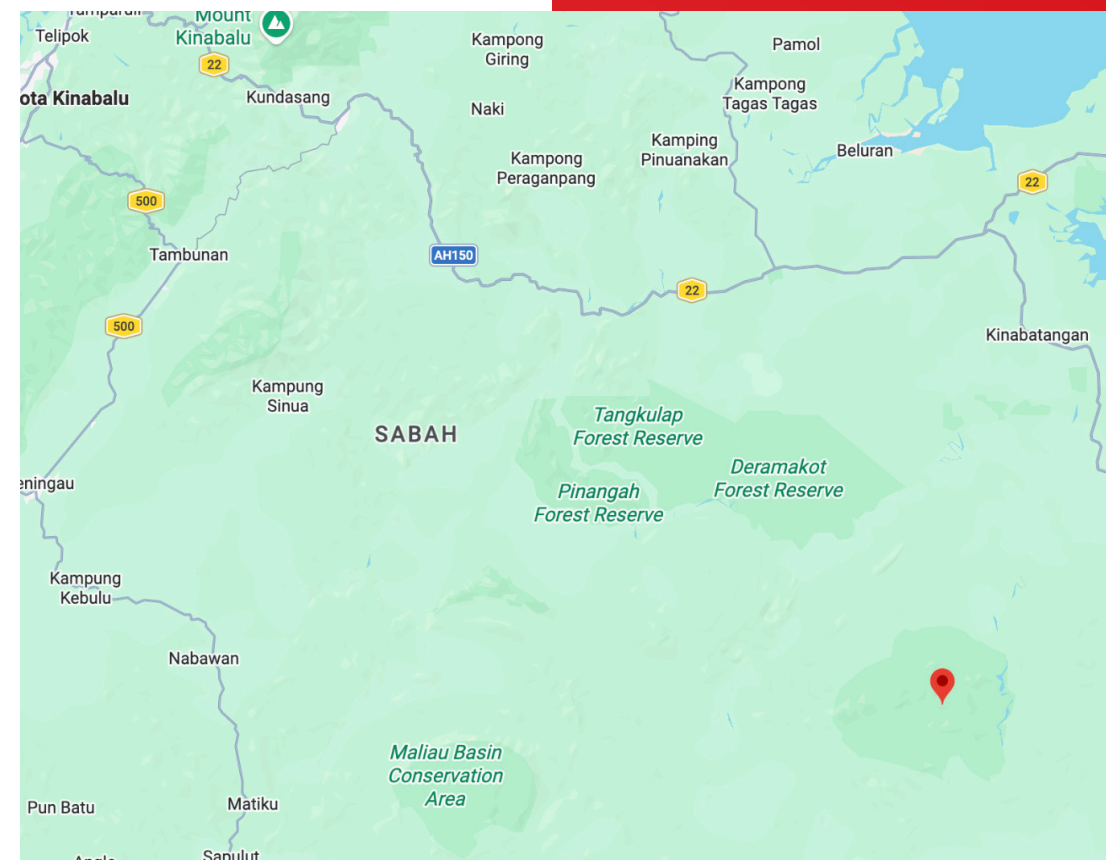
The royal couple spent about three hours at the Danum Valley Conservation Area, and then took off for the Borneo Rainforest Lodge's 360m canopy walk.

It is breathtaking. It literally took my breath away as I gingerly walked the rope bridges suspended high up in the canopies.

The view up in the trees gave me a bird's eye view (or should I say an orangutan's perspective) of the flora and fauna.

Borneo Rainforest Lodge might not guarantee that we'll see wildlife in Danum Valley as it is not a zoo, but each time I'm there, the night safari – whether it rains or not in the rainforest – is a must-do excursion. It offers a nocturnal wildlife spectacle, including civets, sambar deer, snakes and insects.

Hong Kong's nightlife is vibrant with partygoers, but Danum Valley buzzes with “party animals” after sunset. It is a must-visit for those who want to walk on nature's wild side.



## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

 [CLICK HERE](#)

The distance between Kuala Lumpur and Danum Valley (Sabah, Malaysian Borneo) is approximately 1,960km (1,218 miles).

To get to Danum Valley, fly into Lahad Datu Airport (LDU) in Sabah, Borneo, the nearest hub, then arrange a 4x4 transfer (about 2-2½ hours) through your lodge or tour operator to the protected conservation area, as it's remote and requires organised transport on unpaved roads for the final stretch.

Be prepared for the jungle, bring leech socks, trekking shoes, swimwear, insect repellent and curiosity.

You might also want to see the Tabin Wildlife Reserve, a 300,000-acre (121,406ha) reserve in Lahad Datu town. It is home to highly endangered animals such as the Borneo pygmy elephant, the Sumatran rhinoceros, and the tembadau.

The reserve also has nine species of primates and three species of cats, which are on the protected wildlife list. It is also a bird-watching paradise. Tabin also has active and mineral-rich mud volcanoes, which attract wildlife for their mineral intake.

For more information, you can visit the following websites:

<https://danumvalley.rainforestlodge.com/>  
<https://tabinwildlife.com.my/>





# MONGOLIA

During the Khalkha river war of 1939, not a single bullet hit the statue.  
PHOTO: BATZORIG B./GO GO MONGOLIA





Located in the easternmost part of Mongolia, locals call this god Aryabal the Savior of the Eight Dangers.  
PHOTO: BATZORIG B./GO GO MONGOLIA

 **gogo**  
PHOTO

## DORNOD

# Inside Mongolia's hidden heritage spots

**BY NOMIN AMAR-AMGALAN**

*Go Go Mongolia*

There is an old saying that Japanese pilots who flew with the command to drop a bomb near Khalkha river flew over the God statue several times, but they did not drop the bomb out of respect for this magnificent artwork...

In the territory of Khalkha river soum of Dornod province, there is a unique cultural and historical beauty called Ikh Burkhan 35km north of the soum centre, along the bank of Khalkha river, in the coordinates of northern latitude 47°52'23" and eastern longitude 118°27'13" at an altitude of 655m above sea level.

The artwork is directed from the southeast to the northwest, using the slopes of the mountains. The image of the great god is clearly visible.

The masterpiece was created between 1859 and 1864 by carving natural stone on the ground. It is said that similar designs and sizes do not exist in Mongolia or Central Asia.

Let's describe the history of this unique cultural treasure first.

In the middle of the 19th century, Setsen Khan province, or the current geographical location of Sukhbaatar, Khentii, Dornod, Govisumber provinces, and most of the counties around Chita, Russia, and Lake Hulun, China, was hit by natural disasters and droughts. And the lives of the people became very difficult.

For this reason, Togtokhtur Bat-Ochir, Ilden Jun Van of the Setsenkhan Province of Khalkha, as known throughout Mongolia as the To Van, gathered the noble monks to find out the reason. Eventually, they decided to create an image of God named Janraisag.

Located in the easternmost part of Mongolia, the locals call this god Aryabal the Savior of the Eight Dangers. I later heard from someone who knew that this god was protecting Mongolia from the east.

From a religious point of view, it seems so. Perhaps the Japanese invaders were defeated because they were unable to attack beyond the region.

Thus, 11 of the 23 counties of Setsen Khan agreed to donate to the creation of the gods, and Togtokhtur himself was personally responsible for the construction work.

Jigvajidjav Janraisag, a 12-foot-tall (3.7m) copper statue near the Temple of Culture in Tamsag Bulag, near Utai Mountain, collapsed when he first tried to build it. Three stations on the west side of their winter palace, on the eastern slopes of Mount Crow, the first place where the sun rises, another statue was built for two years, but slipped and fell again because of heavy rains.

So they decided to create the statue of God on the west bank of the Khalkha River, on the slope to the east, on the sunny slope, where God now resides.

This place is mentioned in the Secret History of Mongols, as Genghis Khan moved through the province after the destruction of the Hereid state, and spent the winter and spring of 1203-1204.



This was created between 1859 and 1864 by carving natural stone on the ground.  
PHOTO: BATZORIG B./GO GO MONGOLIA

 **gogo**  
PHOTO





In order to avoid burdening the local people with charitable donations, the idea was to build with natural stone, and one ox cart was mobilised from each family with livestock.

Construction work of the god statue had failed twice before and had gained a great deal of experience, so the artwork was rebuilt in a 220x97 area.

Unfortunately, Mongolia has been dominated by atheism since the 1940s, and we Mongolians have destroyed this unique masterpiece of Buddhism. One example is the use of stone in the name of building foundations and garages (1960-1975). In fact, during the Khalkha river war of 1939, not a single bullet hit the statue, and even our enemy cared about it so much.

When Buddhism was restored several years later, restoration of the statue was made with cement in 1996, but it was not successful due to wrong technique of reconstruction. A sketch of the statue is stored in the museum of Choibalsan city, Dornod province.

In 2007, the government resolution No. 3 to restore the God statue was made and implementation was planned between 2008 and 2015. When we arrived in mid-June 2016, the process of the God statue restoration had already begun. A closer look revealed that the cement had been cleaned.

Sooner or later, if you visit Dornod province, I recommend you to visit Dornod province museum, and see this wonderful artwork.



## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

[CLICK HERE](#)

Irk Burkhan in Khalkh Soum, Dornod province, is located 1,074km (667 miles) from Ulaanbaatar.

To reach the Ikh Burkhan stone monument in eastern Mongolia, you must first travel to the capital Ulaanbaatar, then fly or drive to Dornod Province, and finally take a cross-country vehicle to the site.

Per Ayan Travel Mongolia, a travel agency, the best time to visit is in spring and autumn (April–June and September–October), which offer the mildest, most pleasant weather for travel. There are no hotels at the remote monument site. You will need to stay in nearby towns or arrange traditional ger camp accommodations through your tour provider.





The Shwedagon Pagoda is a revered place of worship for the people of Myanmar and followers of Buddhism. PHOTO: ELEVEN MEDIA



# MYANMAR



YANGON

# The revered Shwedagon Pagoda, cherished by the Myanmar people

*By Eleven Media*

If you visit Myanmar, you cannot say you have truly visited the country without seeing the Shwedagon Pagoda, where Buddha's hair relics have been enshrined for 2,500 years. The Shwedagon Pagoda, located on the 114-acre (46ha) Singuttara Hill in Yangon, is a revered place of worship for the people of Myanmar and followers of Buddhism.

Initially, the pagoda was 44 taungs (1 taung is equal to 1½ feet or 45.7cm) tall, but now it stands at 326ft (99.4m). The Shwedagon Pagoda is covered with hundreds of gold plates and topped with 4,531 diamonds, the largest of which is 72 carats.

Visitors can not only experience the devotion and beliefs of Buddhists but also admire Myanmar's finest heritage, including architectural masterpieces, sculptures, and artworks.

The Shwedagon Pagoda, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, is surrounded by hundreds of colourful temples, stupas, and statues, showcasing nearly 2,500 years of architectural history. Therefore, it is a must-visit place for travellers.

Grand and magnificent, with intricate details, the Shwedagon Pagoda features ancient sculptures and architectural works crafted by the people of Myanmar themselves. Visitor guides are ready to explain and help you understand these historic and artistic masterpieces.

### The origin and evolution of the name “Shwedagon”

Before Yangon Division came into existence, it was known as Okkalapa Division and Okkalapa City, ruled by King Okkalapa. Later, the merchant brothers Tapussa and Bhallika brought sacred hair relics of the Buddha and built a stupa on Singuttara Hill, enshrining eight strands of Gautama Buddha’s hair along with relics of three previous Buddhas. Thus, the stupa was named “Tigonpa” Pagoda. This name evolved into “Dagon”, and the region was called Dagon Division.



Visitors can experience the devotion and beliefs of Buddhists, while also admiring Myanmar's finest heritage, including architectural masterpieces, sculptures, and artworks. PHOTO: ELEVEN MEDIA



Grand and magnificent, with intricate details, the Shwedagon Pagoda features ancient sculptures and architectural works crafted by the people of Myanmar themselves. PHOTO: ELEVEN MEDIA

During the reign of King Alaungpaya, who established the Third Myanmar Empire, he successfully attacked the Mon people and renamed Dagon to Yangon. From that time onward, the stupa became widely known not only in Myanmar but around the world as the Shwedagon Pagoda.

### Historical evolution

Over 2,600 years ago (around 588 BC), on the full moon day of Kason in the 103rd Maha Sakkaraj (Buddhist Era), Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment in the region of Magadha in India. At that time, the merchant brothers Tapussa and Bhallika from Okkalapa region met the Buddha and became his first lay disciples.

After making offerings of honey cakes to the Buddha, they were given eight strands of his hair as relics. While returning by ship, four of the hair relics were requested and enshrined by other devotees along the way, with the brothers’ permission. The remaining four hair relics were brought back to Okkalapa and, along with King Okkalapa and the local people, they began constructing a stupa on Singuttara Hill in Yangon.

This stupa, initially 44 taungs high, was first consecrated on the full moon day of Tabaung in the 103rd Maha Sakkaraj, on a Wednesday. This marked the beginning of worship at the Shwedagon Pagoda.





Visitor guides are ready to explain and help you understand the pagoda's historic and artistic masterpieces.  
PHOTO: ELEVEN MEDIA

**The Four Relics of Shwedagon**

It is said that the Shwedagon Pagoda enshrines the sacred relics of four Buddhas. In addition to the four strands of hair from Gautama Buddha, it also houses the staff of Kakusandha Buddha, the water filter of Koṇāgamana Buddha, and the robe of Kassapa Buddha. Therefore, because it enshrines the relics of these four Buddhas, the people of Myanmar refer to it as the “Four Relics Shwedagon”.

**Shwedagon Pagoda: How to Get There and Important Information**

To reach the Shwedagon Pagoda, visitors can easily access Yangon International Airport, where taxis are readily available. From the airport, it's a short drive to the pagoda, located in the heart of

Yangon. At the exit of the airport, there are taxis making transportation convenient for travellers. The taxi fare should be around 20,000 kyats or 30,000 kyats (S\$18).

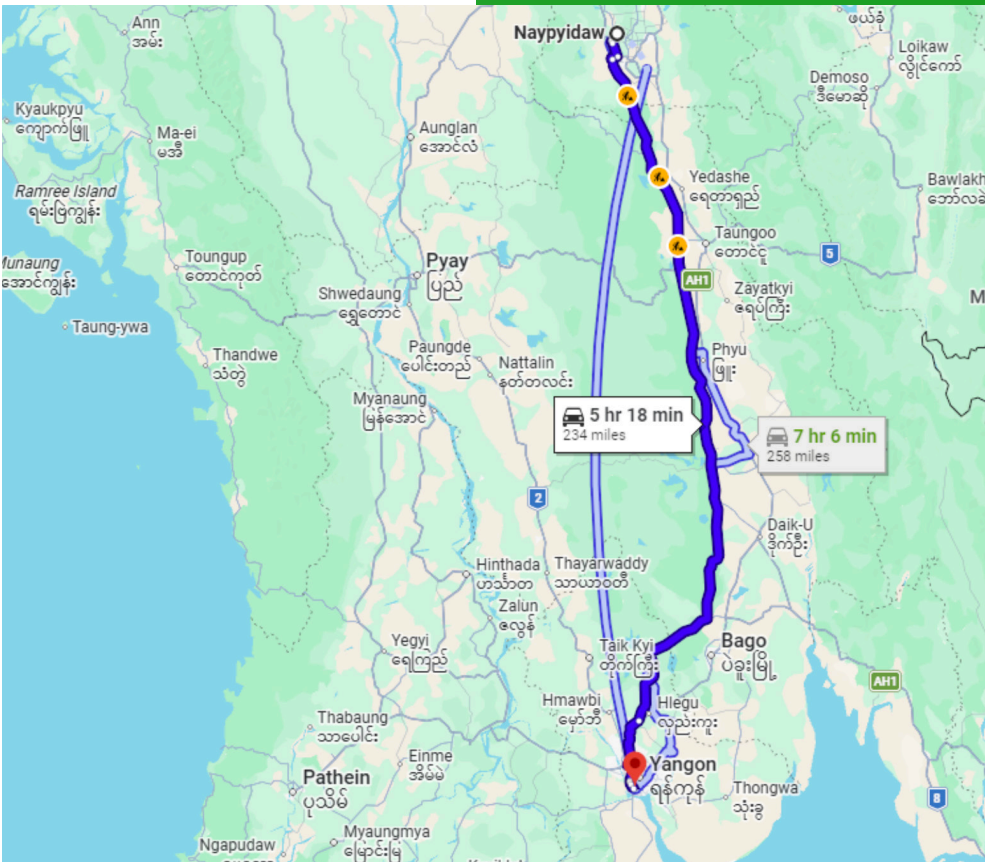
For those using the Grab Taxi application, getting to the Shwedagon Pagoda is also straightforward. Simply select the Shwedagon pagoda as your destination, and the driver will take you there. The fare is usually around 20,000 kyats, and the journey takes about 30 minutes.

If you prefer to take the bus, there are also airport shuttle buses available that can drop you off near the pagoda for a fare of 500 kyats. Starting from the gate, you will reach the Shwedagon Pagoda bus stop upon reaching the 10th stop. A five-minute walk will bring you to the eastern entrance of the Shwedagon Pagoda. Be aware that buses can be crowded, and since you might not be familiar with the area, you could miss your stop, get off the bus before your stop, or face language barriers.

The Shwedagon Pagoda is managed by the Pagoda Board of Trustees, and an entrance fee of 20,000 kyats is charged for each foreign visitor. In terms of dress code, visitors are not allowed to enter the pagoda wearing shorts, skirts, or inappropriate clothing. However, there is no need to worry about this, as staff under the Board of Trustees will assist you with proper attire.

You can find the information you need to know before visiting through the following links.

Finally, we warmly welcome all visitors to Myanmar, and when you visit the Shwedagon Pagoda, you will experience the grandeur and significance of this iconic symbol of Buddhism, as appreciated by the Myanmar people.



A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

[CLICK HERE](#)

To get to Shwedagon Pagoda (located on No.1 Shwedagon Pagoda Road in Yangon), the easiest way for visitors is to take a taxi or use the ride-hailing app, Grab. The journey from downtown Yangon takes about 5–15 minutes, while a ride from Yangon International Airport takes 30–45 minutes.

The pagoda has a strict dress code. You must dress modestly by making sure your shoulders and knees are covered. Avoid tight, revealing clothing. If you arrive wearing shorts or a short skirt or dress, you will be asked to rent or borrow a traditional longyi (sarong) at the entrance. All visitors must remove their shoes and socks before stepping onto the pagoda grounds. You can carry them with you or leave them in designated shoe-deposit areas for a small fee.



Shwedagon Pagoda is the crown jewel of Yangon's skyline.  
PHOTO: ELEVEN MEDIA





NEPAL

Sikali Festival in Khokana.  
PHOTO: THE KATHMANDU POST



## KHOKANA

# A serene time capsule away from Kathmandu bustle

Mist-draped Khokana. PHOTO: THE KATHMANDU POST

**BY KSHITIZ PRATAP SHAH**

*The Kathmandu Post*

It is a wildly growing urban forest quickly transforming into a busy metropolis where every inch of space is ready to be sold and built.

Yet, pockets of the past remain – small, peaceful neighbourhoods where houses are still made of wood, paths are made of stone tiles, and the stillness of a world that wants to stay intact and immobile.

These places are known for tourism, culture, and the restoration of community pride. One such stop is the quiet village of Khokana in southern Lalitpur.

Khokana is comparatively close to the mainland urban Lalitpur; from the ring road junction of Bagdole, it takes only a 10-minute drive to reach there. From the airport, you can take a cab directly to Khokana, which will take around half an hour.

Get your cameras and hiking boots ready; the area is filled with historical artefacts and hiking trails.

However, it is vastly different from the city. It is much nearer to the hills, where stone-paved paths, which could easily be goat trails, are rare in today's Kathmandu.

One such goat trail leads to Sikali temple, a major attraction of the area and accessible only on foot. The pavements are lined with big and small temples on each side, along with ponds that serve as clean water sources and a location for religious rituals.

The houses are made of bricks and wood. The concrete invasion, although present, is minimal. Scattered every few hundred metres are small mustard oil mills, co-operative businesses of the locals of Khokana that have existed since medieval times.

A site well-recognised for its historical significance, Khokana was even proposed to be made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996.

## Sikali Temple

Around an hour's walk from the historic town, Sikali Temple can be reached, which is also the location for its famed Sikali Jatra.

While it can be reached through any public vehicle, a more holistic and adventurous route is to follow the goat trails on the outskirts of Khokana. This route, albeit long, allows for great hiking opportunities, scenic views of the hills surrounding the Kathmandu Valley, and a close-up view of the medieval but well-maintained architecture of the local houses.

Even if you lose the way, which is very possible, the locals are very welcoming and more than willing to guide you. The main temple itself is three storeys tall and built in the Pagoda style, a common style in many temples in the valley.

It is surrounded by a lush grass field, which plays the stage to the Sikali Jatra held every year. The temple, like many religious spots around Khokana, is dedicated to the local deity Shree Rudrayani.

The Sikali Jatra, a five-day festival that serves as an alternative to Dashain for the Khokana locals, is filled with chariot dances, battle enactments, and storytelling celebrations in the worship of Goddess Rudrayani.

## Historical Khokana town

Khokana's historical town is located around five minutes' walking distance from the local bus park. The town complex, paved with hand-made stone tiles, is graced with the Indrayanee temple but also has many red-bricked houses built in the local Newari architecture, some of them centuries old.



Khokana is known for tourism, culture, and the restoration of community pride. PHOTO: THE KATHMANDU POST





Pockets of the past remain in Khokana.  
PHOTO: THE KATHMANDU POST

One such house is the “Khokana Museum”. Although closed, it is widely popular for being the first house to be lit with electricity in Nepal, as Chandra Shamsher did in 1911.

The stand-holder of the first light bulb can still be seen, serving as a historical monument for everyone to see.

Similarly, the town complex is also filled with Guthi houses, small ponds, and even the local Ward office. While the Ward office provides a wealth of information for visitors interested in the area’s history, the Guthi halls symbolise the strong community support culture of the locals.

The ponds, a notable one present right opposite the Indrayanee temple, have stone taps and remind us of primitive ways of obtaining clean water – a practice many locals are still engaged in.

Yet, these ponds are also religious locations, especially used in rituals in the Sikali Jatra.



Woman hanging chillies to dry.  
PHOTO: THE KATHMANDU POST

Finally, a stroll through the complex allows visitors to explore old houses and historical artefacts in the serene quietness of Khokana, while the small outlets and Choila places nearby allow you to enjoy the spicy duck or chicken delicacies at the same time.

Overall, the historical complex is enough to transport visitors back to a glimpse of the medieval past of the Kathmandu Valley.

### Mustard oil mills

The most well-known feature of Khokana is its mustard oil mills, which have been operational for hundreds of years and have been using the same methods of preparation since their inception.

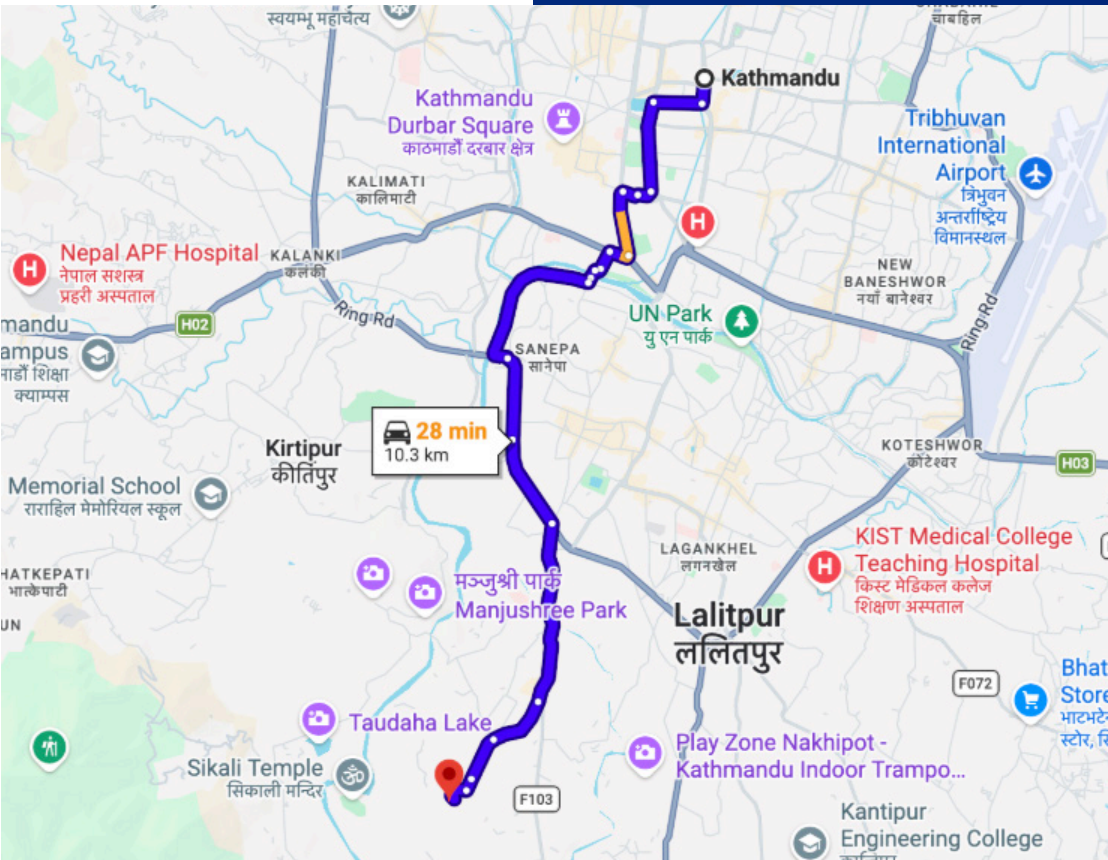
These mills, scattered throughout Khokana, are often community-owned, and even the ones owned by certain individuals have almost exclusively employed locals.

Despite the advent of modern machinery, there is still substantial demand for their products due to the guarantee.

When I visited one such mill, the local staff informed me that the furnace and oil presser used by them were 300 years old, given by the Patan royalty even before the Shahs became king.

In addition to buying pure, organically created mustard oil and pellets, visiting these oil mills offers many educational benefits for international and local tourists alike.

Khokana offers visitors a unique glimpse into a preserved bubble of the past through its tranquillity, preservation of ancient lifestyle and cultural elements, and remarkable self-sustenance.



## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

[CLICK HERE](#)

Khokana is located roughly 8km south of Kathmandu, near Patan (Lalitpur). It typically takes about 30 to 60 minutes to reach, depending on your starting point and the traffic in the capital.

Getting to Khokana is quite straightforward. The cheapest option is by bus. Head to the Old Bus Park in central Kathmandu or Ratna Park and take a bus heading toward Lpatan (Patan). From Lagankhel Bus Park in Patan, catch a connecting local bus going directly to Khokana or Bungamati. Travel time is roughly 45 to 60 minutes.

You can also opt for ride-sharing or a taxi, the fastest and most convenient way. If you are staying in tourist areas like Thamel, use ride-sharing apps like Pathao. You can also hail a local taxi and negotiate the fare before heading out. Travel time is around 30 to 45 minutes.

If you want to combine Khokana with the neighbouring heritage village of Bungamati, booking a day trip is a great option. Guided tours offer round-trip private transport, hotel pick-ups, and a guide. You can check availability on platforms like GetYourGuide or Tripadvisor.





Tharparkar was considered one of the most sacred sites for the followers of Jainism. PHOTO: DAWN



# PAKISTAN



NAGARPAKAR

# The forgotten Gori Jain temple

BY EMA ANIS  
Dawn

It's a hot January afternoon – nothing unusual for a desert. Our bus enters a “sensitive” zone, and our cameras are confiscated. Too bad for visiting a historical sacred site; but we say a little gratitude for the invention of smartphones.

We are inside a small village called “Guri” (or “Gori”) in Nagarparkar, a district in the Tharparkar region of Sindh, Pakistan. We pass by mud houses through a narrow road where women wear brightly coloured clothes and children watch with playful curious eyes. We leave the houses behind and, at once, are teleported to a marvel of the 16th century: the Jain Gori temple.

Jainism is considered one of the most ancient religions of the Indian subcontinent and bears close resemblance to Buddhism with its teachings of non-violence and spirituality. However, the followers of Jainism now remain very few, and not much research has been conducted on Jainas or their archaeological gems found in Pakistan.

Tharparkar was considered one of the most sacred sites for the followers of Jainism. Tradition says that the final 24th spiritual leader of Jainism, Mahavira, arrived in Tharparkar in person. This region was also inhabited mostly by Jainas traders nearly 2,000 years ago when the area flourished economically due to the presence of an in-land port. Today, locals say, there are a few Jainas living in and around the Tharparkar district, but most do not reveal their identity because of security concerns. The Jainas' historical presence also manifests itself through several temples in the region, but they also lie abandoned, neglected and shrouded in mystery.

The sight of the Gori temple is both overwhelming and upsetting. There are signs of architectural excellence, and there are signs of disrespect. The white domes and curvilinear shikharas are juxtaposed against distasteful acts of spray paint vandalism. We ignore the unwanted and focus on what once was magnificent.



The white domes and curvilinear shikharas are juxtaposed against distasteful acts of spray paint vandalism. We ignore the unwanted and focus on what once was magnificent. PHOTO: DAWN



The main dome is surrounded by 52 small domes (cupolas) that were used to store images of Jain spiritual leaders (the tirthankaras). PHOTO: DAWN

Local stories say the temple was built by a wealthy Hindu merchant and is dedicated to Lord Parshwanath, the 23rd Jain prophet. Jain temples are typically built in marble or stone, but, in the absence of any in-depth research, it is unsure whether the Gori temple employs marble for its building structure or if it has been simply whitewashed over time. Some parts of the temple do visibly lie in ruin: walls destroyed by an earthquake, and sections allegedly broken down by the British at some point during their occupation. None of these sections have been repaired. Without frequent visitors, the temple is also infested with bats.

The structure of the Gori temple is reminiscent of Jain architecture and resembles the 11th century white marble structure of the Vimala Vasahi temple of mount Abu in India with its domes and rising towers (shikharas) with rectangular intricate carvings. The main dome is surrounded by 52 small domes (cupolas) that were used to store images of Jain spiritual leaders (the tirthankaras). The walls outside have carvings of deities and the temple is lined with several small chambers that were used





to house worshippers. The walls, the pillars and the insides of the domes with concentric circles boasts of beautiful paintings depicting Jain religious imagery. Pakistan’s Directorate General of Archaeology claims that these paintings are older than any other fresco art of Jain temples in North India. Unfortunately, possibly because of lack of security and acts of vandalism, the temple does not host any idols, except of a picture of a god and a goddess inside one of the small rooms.

Places like the Gori temple are not your average buildings. They are portals that provide a chance to go back several centuries and admire the craftsmanship, the skill, the knowledge, and the brilliance of the humans that lived long before us. But it is imperative that these sites are respected, preserved, and restored so that humans long after us can also marvel in the glory of the past.



The structure of the Gori temple is reminiscent of Jain architecture. PHOTO: DAWN

## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

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The distance from Islamabad to the district of Nagarparkar in Sindh is 1,537km (955 miles).

The closest major airport, however, is in Karachi. From Karachi, any private local transport can be hired to reach the Guri village of Nagarparkar. The distance between Karachi and Guri is around 390km, and it takes about seven to eight hours to travel via road.

From the airport, continue on the Shahrah-e-Faisal Road towards Thatta. From Thatta, turn towards the Sajawal Bypass and then get on to the Badin-Nauakot Road. Then turn right at the Wangomor (intersection) to get onto the Badin-Mithi Road and continue for two hours till you reach the village of Guri.

Enter the village and continue straight on the road. Once you pass by the village, you will arrive at the temple.

The exact location of the temple can be found using Google Maps, with the assistance of the locals.

The best time to leave Karachi would be early morning, around 5am, so the temple can be visited during the day and an early return can be made to Karachi.

Don’t forget to bring sunscreen, wear comfortable clothing and shoes, keep cold water bottles and stay hydrated. Wear caps/hats to protect yourself from the heat. Make sure you have internet in your mobile phones and/or offline maps to access different sites.





The Ruins.  
PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



## PHILIPPINES



## TALISAY, NEGROS OCCIDENTAL

# Home of heritage houses

BY EDGAR ALLAN M. SEMBRANO

*Philippine Daily Inquirer*

Founded most likely as a town in 1788 and as a parish in 1848 under the tutelage of San Nicolas de Tolentino, Minuluan, today's Talisay City in Negros Occidental, has been opulent since the Spanish colonial period, thanks to its first parish priest, Fr Fernando Cuenca, OAR, who introduced sugarcane farming in the town and in Negros, and invented a hydraulic machine to process the noble cane.

Fr Cuenca, the town's parish priest from 1850 until his death in 1902, also introduced the cultivation of other agricultural products such as abaca, coffee and root crops.

He transformed the town from a "vast cogon wasteland" to a prosperous sugar-producing one, notwithstanding his founding of many towns and parishes in the province.

For Fr Cuenca's immense contributions to the development of Minuluan, renamed Talisay after 1912, a monument was erected at the town plaza on May 30, 1974, his 150th birth anniversary.



Balay ni Tana Dicang.  
PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER



Don Simplicio Lizares Mansion.  
PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

## Tana Dicang

Minuluan's economic success, due mainly to sugarcane and sugar production, grew steadily from the time of its founding as a parish so that by the 1870s, the town was producing around six million kilograms of sugar.

With these, rich families started to build their houses, grand bahay na bato (stone houses) in the población.

One of those houses, which still exists today, is the house of Enrica Alunan Lizares, commonly known as Balay ni Tana Dicang. Tana was short for "Kapitana", as she was referred to in the community.

Married to Efigenio Lizares, Tana Dicang ran the operations of their family's haciendas (estates or plantations) in Talisay and neighbouring towns and made fortunes from the business.

Built in 1872, the house features a first level of stone and second level of wood.

The first level has a pair of arched portals and arched windows. It also has pilasters with carved stone medallions beneath, a design that is mirrored at the second level.



Gen. Aniceto Lacson House.  
PHOTO: NHCP/PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Stored in its zaguan (roofed entryway) is a silver carroza (carriage or float), while its despacho (study), a storeroom for sugar to be sent to Iloilo, is now an art space.

The second level is accessed through a grand staircase with intricately carved handrails, which leads to the reception area, dining areas and rooms.

The house, opened as a museum in 2008, was declared an Important Cultural Property by the National Museum of the Philippines (NMP) in 2018.

Adrian Lizares, the family foundation representative, said their clan is very honoured by the distinction given to the house and expresses gratitude to the institutions involved in the declaration and upkeep of the house, such as the NMP.

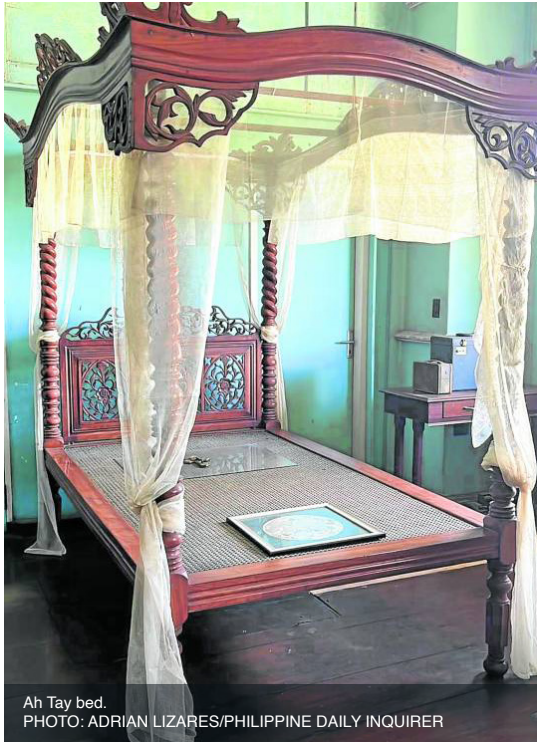
"We are dedicated to the conservation and preservation of the Balay, as was willed by Lola Dicang," said the fourth-generation Lizares.

"The unity of the family keeps the heritage in good stead, and we are so happy to do all these, but it is challenging in a very exciting manner," he added.





Grand staircase.  
PHOTO: ADRIAN LIZARES/PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER



Ah Tay bed.  
PHOTO: ADRIAN LIZARES/PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER



Balay's door with historically-correct colours.  
PHOTO: ADRIAN LIZARES/PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Other houses

Talisay's other heritage houses, all products of its sugar industry, include the neo-Romanesque Lacson Mansion Ruins, popularly called The Ruins.

Perhaps the most well-photographed of the city's heritage homes, this house, also known as Balay Dako (Big House), was built by Don Mariano Lacson as a tribute to his wife, who died while giving birth to one of their children.

The elaborately designed house was purposely burned by Lacson to avoid it being used as a garrison during World War II.

In front of this house is the ruins of an old simborio or a smokestack used for mills producing sugar.

Another house in Talisay is the late 19th-century Gen Aniceto Lacson House, also a bahay na bato (stone house) in brick and wood.

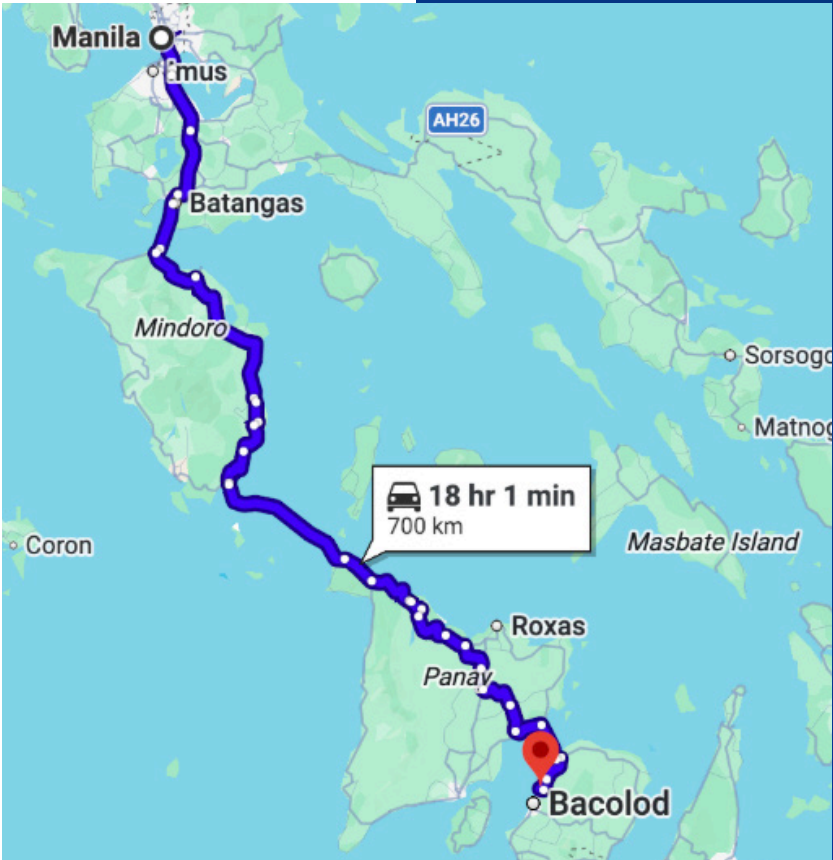
This house, noted for its ornate cast-iron grilles and wrap-around veranda, was the home of Lacson, who led the revolution against the Spaniards in 1898. Coincidentally, he was Fr Cuenca's friend.

The house was declared a National Historical Landmark by the then National Historical Institute in 2002 and an Important Cultural Property by NMP in 2018.

One of Tana Dicang's sons, Simplicio, also built a grand mansion not far from her house.

Built in the Art Deco style, the impressive house was designed by architect Juan Nakpil and completed in 1936.

Nakpil, declared National Artist for Architecture in 1973, also designed other iconic buildings such as the Capitan Pepe Building in Manila, the reconstruction of the Quiapo Church also in Manila in 1930 and the Rizal House in Calamba, Laguna in 1950.



The distance to Talisay City, Negros Occidental, from Manila is 700km (435 miles).

The fastest and most convenient way to go to Talisay City from the Philippine capital is to fly from Manila to Bacolod-Silay Airport and then take a short land transfer to Talisay.

Talisay City sits right between Silay City and Bacolod City. Once you land at the airport, you have three primary options to reach Talisay: shuttle van, Grab or taxi, or a tricycle and jeepney combo.

If you prefer maritime travel or have heavy cargo, you can take a passenger ferry from Manila North Harbor to the Port of Bacolod. The sea journey takes around 20 to 24 hours. From Bacolod port, you can take a short taxi ride or a jeepney going north to reach Talisay City.

A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

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SINGAPORE

Though dwarfed by skyscrapers, Yueh Hai Ching Temple's cultural significance towers over that of other structures. PHOTO: GAVIN FOO/THE STRAITS TIMES



RAFFLES PLACE, SINGAPORE

# Inside Yueh Hai Ching Temple, Singapore's oldest Teochew temple

BY CHANTAL SAJAN  
*The Straits Times*

Nestled amid the shiny skyscrapers in bustling Raffles Place, Singapore's oldest Teochew temple is usually a picture of tranquillity.

The 200-year-old Yueh Hai Ching Temple in Phillip Street typically gets about 2,000 visitors a month.

But, around Chinese New Year, more worshippers make their way there. The Chinese believe that praying in temples is one way to usher in good fortune for the new year.

Some might also know Yueh Hai Ching as the temple of love. Devotees seeking a life partner visit Yue Lao, the god of marriage, to tie a red string around the deity's neck in hopes that this will boost their chances of tying the knot.

While the Taoist temple, which spans more than 1,400 sq m, may be dwarfed by the surrounding buildings, its architecture and cultural significance tower over those of other heritage structures of the 1800s.

It is believed to have been built shortly after 1819, when Sir Stamford Raffles established the island as a British free port along the ancient Maritime Silk Road that linked the East and West.

The temple was the first stop for seafarers who survived the arduous journey from the southern coasts of China to Singapore.

It is also called Wak Hai Cheng Bio, which means "Temple of the Calm Seas built by people from Guangdong" in Teochew.

It was rebuilt in 1895 and underwent further repairs from 1994 to 1997. In June 1996, it was gazetted as a national monument.

A S\$7.5 million restoration was carried out from 2010 to 2014 by Singaporean conservator Yeo Kang Shua (right), whose efforts earned him the Award of Merit at the 2014 UNESCO AsiaPacific Heritage Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation.

Only two other temples here have earned such accolades: Thian Hock Keng Temple in Telok Ayer Street (Honourable Mention in 2001) and Hong San See Temple in Mohamed Sultan Road (Award of Excellence in 2010). Both temples are owned by Hokkien clan associations.

Fewer than 10 other buildings in Singapore have been recognised by UNESCO. Among them is Lucky Shophouse, a home in Joo Chiat that was formerly Lucky Bookstore, which picked up the award in 2014.

Since 2000, the awards have been recognising individuals' and organisations' efforts to restore, conserve and transform structures and buildings of heritage value in the region.

In its jury citation, UNESCO said Yueh Hai Ching Temple had the highest density of craft and ornamentation of any temple in Singapore, and had been "methodically and meticulously conserved".

Professor Yeo is the associate head of pillar (research, practice, industry) and associate professor of architectural history, theory and criticism at the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

For the restoration, the 47-year-old worked with a team of architects, engineers and temple artisans, guided by international architectural restoration principles and sensitivity in retaining the temple's historical ornamentation, such as its intricate gold leaf overlay and timber carvings.

He also worked with the temple's custodian, the Ngee Ann Kongsi, a Teochew social welfare organisation believed to have been formed in 1845, to adhere strictly to the essence of Chinese temple architecture.



Professor Yeo Kang Shua worked with a team of architects, engineers and temple artisans to restore Yueh Hai Ching Temple. PHOTO: GAVIN FOO/THE STRAITS TIMES

The project was timely as parts of the structure had begun to fall apart in 2008 due to termite infestation in the wooden support beams, water seepage and years of neglect.

In 2021, Prof Yeo released the first comprehensive book in English on the temple, *Divine Custody: A History Of Singapore's Oldest Teochew Temple*, which was published by National University of Singapore (NUS) Press.

The 244-page book covers more than 10 years of exhaustive research that took the author to China and Britain.

In Singapore, a facsimile of a recently rediscovered land map called The Bute Map – drawn up between 1819 and 1820, and the earliest known map of the city-state – was exhibited in 2012 by the National Library in Victoria Street. It provided vital clues regarding Yueh Hai Ching Temple.

With his book, Prof Yeo tells The Straits Times he wanted to show how he decided to adopt a different approach to studying the temple – and, by extension, Singapore Chinese architecture – through a close examination of the temple's material culture, due to the lack of proper archival documentation on the subject.

"How we think and write about history is shaped by how we study it," says Prof Yeo.

"The micro-observations of the architectural fabric led to further questions about the aesthetics and building technologies, as well as the social and economic milieu in which it was built. I asked myself: How were the architectural components of this building made? Who made them and for what purpose?"

In January 2011, along with representatives of the Ngee Ann Kongsi, he made the first trip to

Chaozhou, China, to source for craftsmen capable of undertaking the restoration.

"We were quite adamant that they must be from Chaozhou, so that the subtleties of traditional temple crafts were not lost," he says. "We made several trips to China during the course of the restoration."

He adds: "Teochew ceramic shard ornamentation is typically seen on roof ridges. However, in Wak Hai Cheng Bio, almost half of the front slope of the roof is filled with such elaborate ornamentation. This is not only unique in Singapore, but such extensive expression is also not seen in China."

In his book, Prof Yeo also argues that the date of the temple's construction in 1826 is not cast in stone.

"The temple must have been in existence in 1826 or earlier – that is, the land would have to be cleared and built upon for it to qualify for the new lease, and time was required for these actions. The supposed 1826 date has never been substantiated by hard evidence."

After checking the Bute Map, Prof Yeo says gambier was grown in the vicinity of the temple and that the plantations were likely owned by Teochew agriculturists. As such, the temple's early worshippers were most likely from this group of immigrants.

There is archival evidence, he adds, indicating that most of the Teochews from Chaozhou worked in gambier and pepper plantations in Riau, which had sprouted since the 1700s.

When Raffles set up a trading settlement in 1819 in Singapore, the Teochew gambier planters and traders relocated their operations and labourers here to benefit from the island's free port status.



Close-up of a composite craft consisting of clay moulding, fresco painting and ceramic shards ornamentation. PHOTO: GAVIN FOO/THE STRAITS TIMES





Approximately half of the front slope of the temple's roof is filled with ornamentation that features ceramic shards. PHOTO: GAVIN FOO/THE STRAITS TIMES

In his book, Prof Yeo argues that Yueh Hai Ching Temple was not just a spiritual rallying point for devotees. It played a much bigger role as a socio-cultural hub – serving as the Teochew community's administrative and welfare centre from the 19th to 20th centuries, as well as an entertainment spot where classical Chinese opera and Teochew puppet shows were staged.

In a nutshell, the temple was seen as “public property” and the trustees, the Ngee Ann Kongsi, act as “custodians” running the temple to ensure the continued spiritual and material well-being of the Chinese community.

The book has received glowing reviews from renowned historians, including Professor Wang Gungwu from NUS and Professor Kwa Chong Guan from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, whose comments are included in the sleeve.

Map research consultant Mok Ly Yng says Prof Yeo's book shows that a significant amount of research had been carried out on Singapore's land administration system since the time of Raffles in 1819.

“What strikes me most is the amount of information which cannot be found in the temple structure itself,” says Mr Mok, who used to work at the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) Mapping Unit, the national mapping agency.

“Prof Yeo managed to weave a coherent narrative of the hardware and heartware of the community involved in bringing the temple into being, and its continued maintenance and existence until the present day.”

Dr Kevin Tan, historian and adjunct professor at NUS's law faculty, says English-language literature on local Chinese temple architecture is sparse in Singapore, and any new book that can shed more light on this is a significant contribution.

“Divine Custody affords us a far greater understanding of particular temple types and their architecture,” he says.

“It is also a corresponding record of architectural thought and attitudes over time, and the uniqueness and skill of the craftsmen who built and restored the temple.”

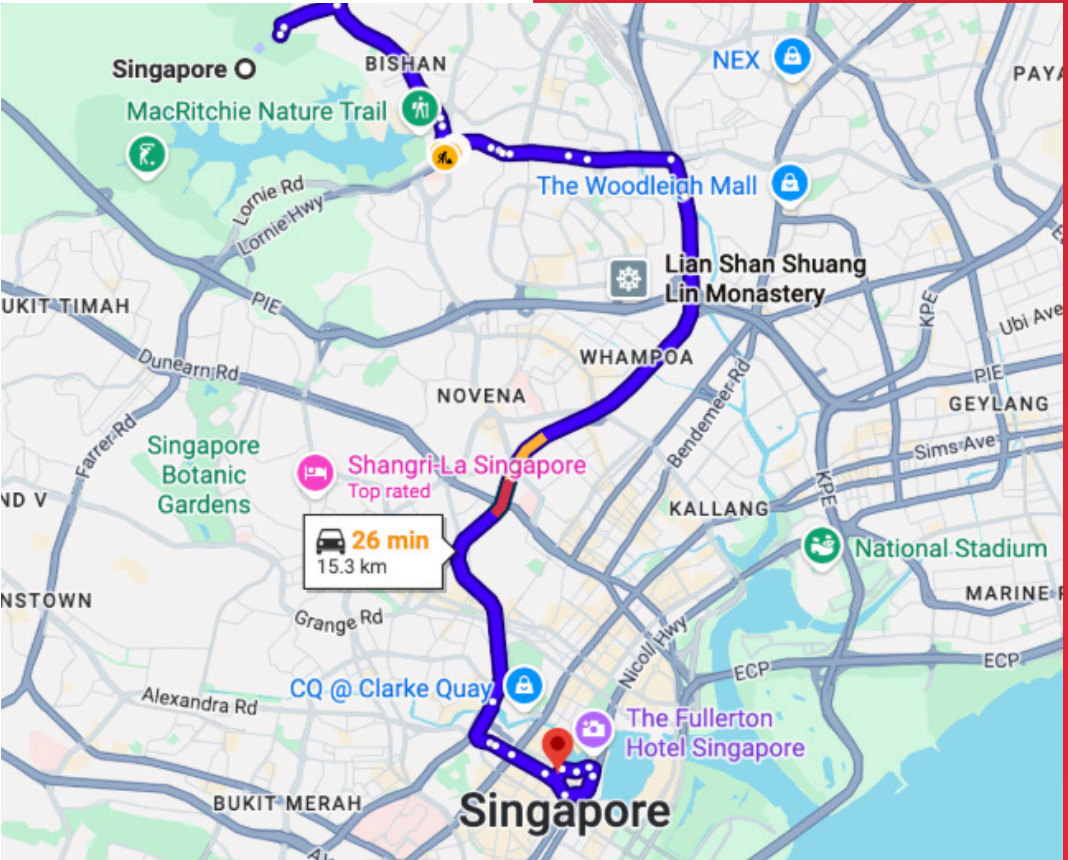
Assistant Professor Koh Keng We of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University observes that the book is a demonstration of how history, architecture, art, craft and heritage can come together to preserve an important feature of Singapore's multi-ethnic community landscape.

“It showcases the temple as an important part of not only our tangible heritage, but also intangible cultural heritage and of our social history,” he says.

“It is a very good example of how the nexus of scholarship, praxis and engagement in the heritage field, which is not recognised enough in some institutes of higher learning in Singapore, is very important to the education of our future generations.”



In its jury citation, UNESCO said Yueh Hai Ching Temple had the highest density of craft and ornamentation of any temple in Singapore, and had been “methodically and meticulously conserved.” PHOTO: GAVIN FOO/THE STRAITS TIMES



## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

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To get to Yueh Hai Ching Temple from Changi Airport, the best way is to take the MRT train (Downtown Line) to Telok Ayer Station (Exit B) or Raffles Place Station (Exit D) and walk a few minutes to 30B Phillip Street, or take buses like 100, 186, 970 to the nearby bus stops, all offering convenient access to this historic Teochew temple.





Visitors can spot the three artillery emplacements and around 100 gun emplacements that are installed at Chojijin. PHOTO: THE KOREA HERALD



# SOUTH KOREA



## GANGHWADO

# A microcosm of Korean history

BY LEE SI-JIN

*The Korea Herald*

Beckoning with its beautiful coastal roads, scenic sunset views and seemingly unending tidal flats known as “getbol”, Ganghwado – the fourth largest island in South Korea – is one of the go-to weekend getaways for those in the capital region.

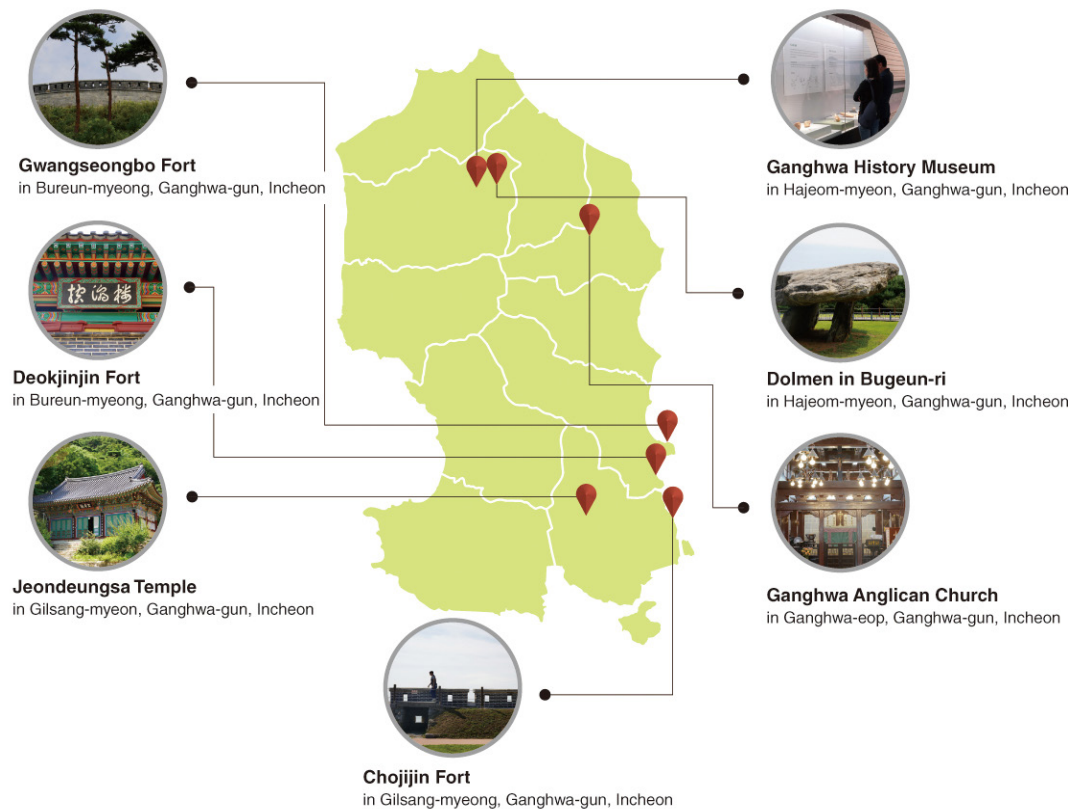
Few, however, set off for the island to embark on a historical journey that starts from the Paleolithic Age some 2.5 million years ago.

While the southeastern city of Gyeongju is considered a “roofless museum” with its many royal tombs, buildings and artefacts of the Silla Kingdom (57 BC-935 AD) and Seoul offers a blend of modernity and palaces from the Joseon era

(1392-1910), Ganghwado’s historical significance and heritage are somewhat overshadowed by its natural surroundings.

The island, off the west coast of the Korean Peninsula, was a ferocious battlefield where the isolationist Joseon court fended off foreign powers.

Though the tranquil mood of the island today makes it difficult for travellers to contemplate the magnitude of the foreign invasions the island experienced, Ganghwado still bears scars from the past. And they are evident at every corner of the island.



Exploring Ganghwado will not only offer a memorable trip to the past, but also a concrete understanding about some of Korea’s lesser-known history.

## Ganghwa History Museum

For those who wish to begin their exploration of the island in chronological order, starting their Ganghwado journey from the Ganghwa History Museum is the perfect choice.

The fastest way to get to Ganghwado from Incheon International Airport is by renting a car from Incheon International Airport’s Gate 13 and 14. Otherwise, one can take the Airport Bus Line No. 9000 at the airport’s Terminal 1 Gate 9B and transfer to Incheon Bus Line No. 90 in Gimpo, Gyeonggi Province, to get to Ganghwado.

The car and bus ride will take an hour and 2½ hours, respectively.

The Ganghwa History Museum narrates stories heavily focused on Ganghwado alone.

But, as the island was the centre stage of the country’s history for a long time, it is not an exaggeration to say that the museum epitomises the history of the Korean Peninsula, ranging from the Paleolithic Age to the Three Kingdoms period (57 BC-AD 668) and Joseon era.

A must-see attraction is the dolmen in Bugeun-ri, an iconic type of dolmen of Korea.

This artifact – one of 160 Ganghwado-based dolmens – is an above-ground burial chamber created with upright stone slabs covered by a wide, flat capstone.

Though it is made of multiple stones standing in a wide, open field, the intimidating vibe of the gigantic size of the dolmen and the traces of time are something that can only be felt on the site.

The island’s dolmen site was inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage along those of Gochang, North Jeolla Province and Hwasun, South Jeolla Province in 2000.

## Defensive walls of Chojijin, Deokjinjin and Gwangseongbo

Chojijin, Deokjinjin and Gwangseongbo were sites of fierce battles during the Western Disturbances of 1866 and 1871, in which expeditions of French and American troops, respectively, attacked Joseon.

Though only a few remains of the fortress walls and outpost are visible now, visitors can spot the three artillery emplacements and around 100 gun emplacements that are installed at Chojijin.



On the pine trees and walls in the vicinity, there are visible damages from projectiles that could be due to the Western Disturbances.

Meanwhile, Deokjinjin was heavily destroyed and only the main gate remained intact.

Visitors can take a sneak peek into the fort from a distance as the passageway to the gate is closed to ensure visitors' safety from falling corroded stones and to protect the heritage from rain and heavy snow.

Gwangseongbo was a major battlefield where Joseon and the United States fought in 1871, leaving 350 Joseon soldiers killed, including General Eo Jae-yeon.

The four batteries – Gwangseong Dondae, Sondolmok Dondae, Yongdu Dondae and Gwangseong Podae – still remain today, allowing visitors to imagine the heavy artillery fires coming from the mouth of two rivers that pass by the island.

Gwangseong Dondae displays the guns used by the Joseon navy and small guns left by the French troops that came to Korea in 1866 to take punitive action against Joseon for its suppression of Catholicism and execution of the nine French missionaries.

Visitors can freely explore the fort, which takes about a 30 to 40-minute walk.

Make sure to scan the QR code with your smartphone to hear the stories of Gwangseongbo that transcend time and space.

### Scars of Japanese occupation at Jeondeungsa, Ganghwa Anglican Church

The pine tree of Jeondeungsa, a Buddhist temple, and the bell in Ganghwa Anglican Church are not designated cultural heritage, but they hold traces of Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945) of the Korean Peninsula.

A light stroll from the east gate of the temple site leads you to a noticeably large pine tree that offers shade for visitors.

As the Pacific War drew near its end, Japanese troops sought raw materials to make military hardware, plundering even Buddhist temple bells, spoons, chopsticks and more. Pine resin was also on their list of raw materials for the military.

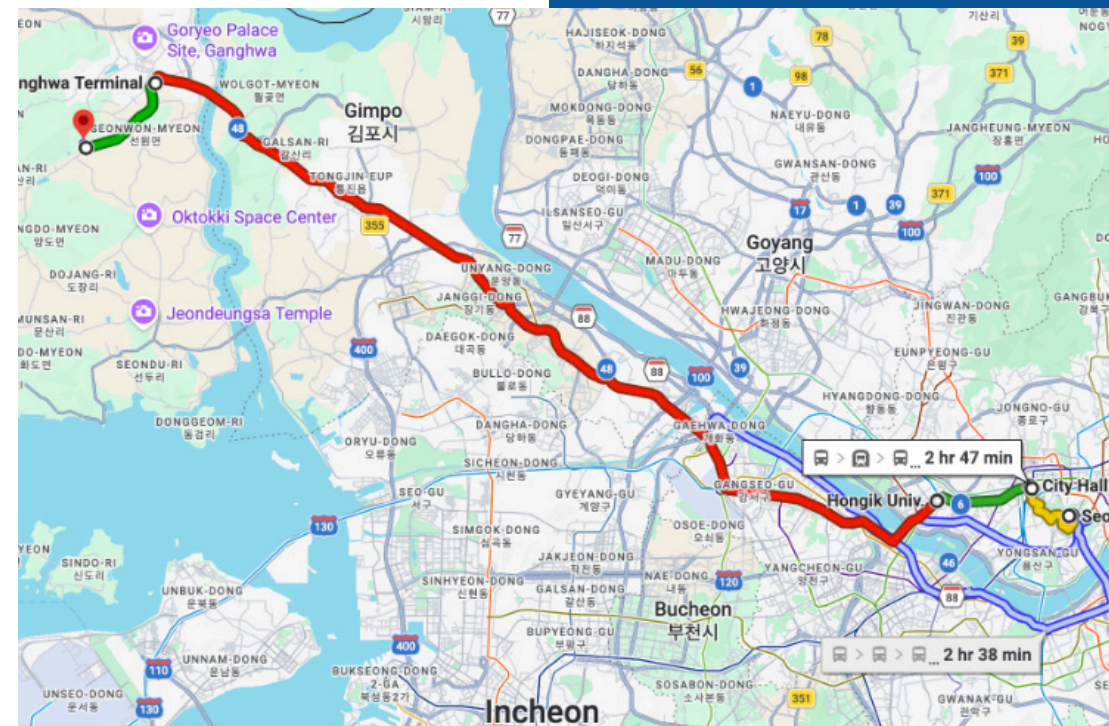
The artificial tree bark peeling from resin extraction are visible on nearby trees as well.

Meanwhile, Ganghwa Anglican Church, a building combining Korean traditional architecture with a basilica, beckons travellers with its blend of architectural styles. An iconic attraction here is the church bell.

Imported from England, the bell was on the list of mandatory donations to Japan during the colonial period along with the stair railings, which were also taken away.

In 1989, a traditional Korean bell, purchased with donations of church members, was installed.

The original bell has not been returned, but the Japanese and Korean Anglican Church decided to restore the stairs as a gesture of repentance for Japan's past mistakes and out of hope for peace and coexistence in East Asia.



The distance to Ganghwado (Ganghwa Island) from Seoul is about 48 to 60km (30 to 37 miles).

To get there from the capital city, take an intercity bus (like the 3000 from Sinchon or Yeongdeungpo) to Ganghwa Bus Terminal, then transfer to local buses or taxis for spots on the island.

Alternatively, you can take a taxi or hop into an airport limousine from Incheon Airport, which is quicker but pricier, with the whole trip taking roughly 1.5-2 hours by bus or faster by taxi/AREX+taxi from Incheon.

## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

[CLICK HERE](#)





## THAILAND

Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew, or the Temple of a Million Bottles, has redefined what it means to recycle, transforming more than 1.5 million discarded beer bottles into an eco-friendly architectural wonder. PHOTO: THE NATION





The temple primarily uses green Heineken and brown Chang beer bottles, both popular in Thailand. PHOTO: THE NATION

SISAKET

# This stunning Thai temple was built using 1.5 million beer bottles

BY TAMMY TAMERYN SOMHAR  
*The Nation*

In the heart of Sisaket Province, northeastern Thailand, stands one of the world’s most remarkable temples, Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew, or the Temple of a Million Bottles.

This dazzling site has redefined what it means to recycle, transforming more than 1.5 million discarded beer bottles into an eco-friendly architectural wonder that glimmers under the tropical sun.

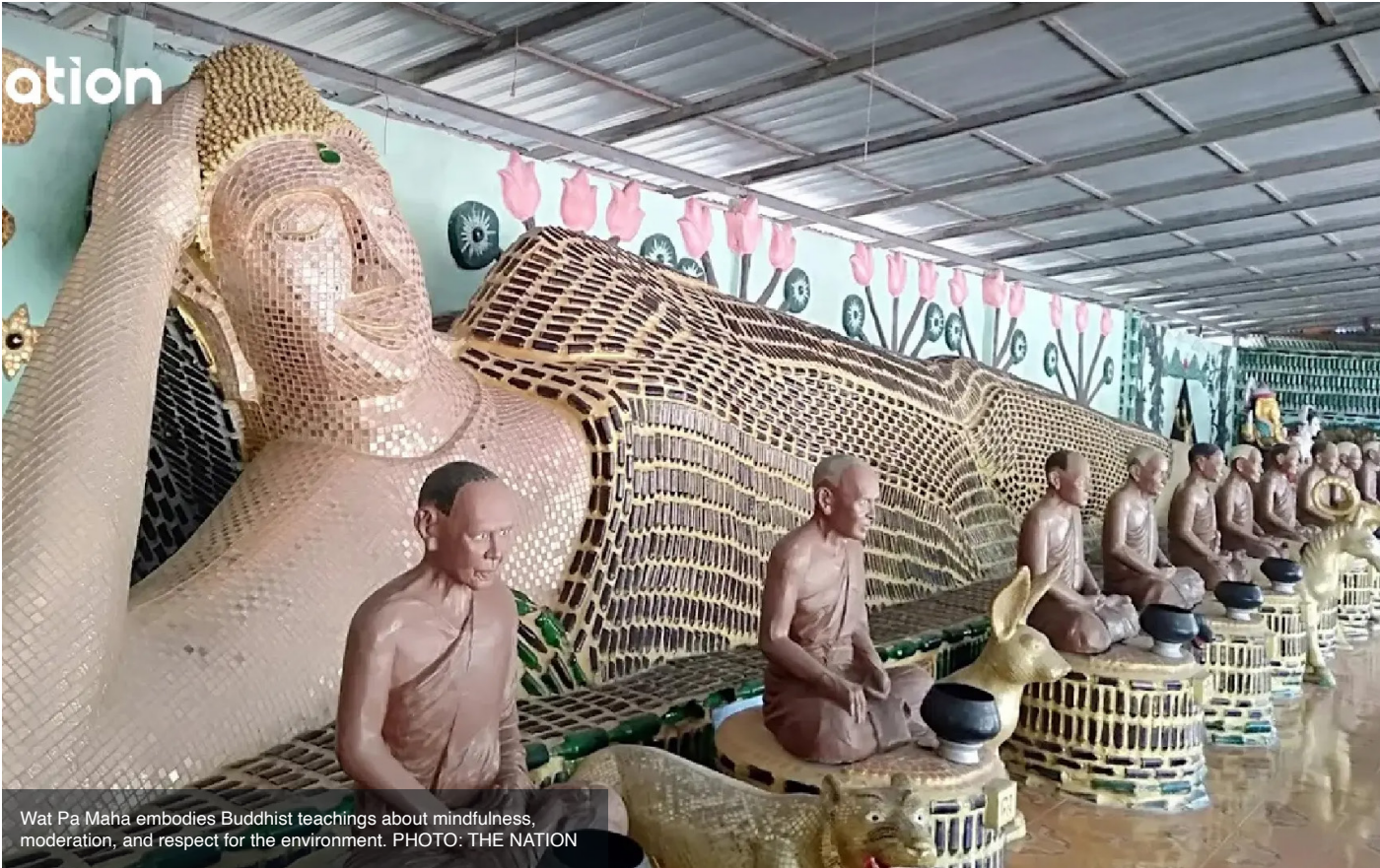
The temple’s story began in 1984 when a group of Buddhist monks sought an innovative way to clean up their community. Instead of letting empty bottles pile up as waste, they decided to turn them into building materials.

Starting with a single structure, the project quickly grew into an entire complex, complete with prayer halls, pagodas, monk quarters, and even restrooms, all meticulously built from recycled glass bottles.

The temple primarily uses green Heineken and brown Chang beer bottles, both popular in Thailand, arranged in intricate patterns that reflect sunlight in shades of jade and amber.



The bottle caps, too, are repurposed to form decorative mosaics across walls and pillars. PHOTO: THE NATION



Wat Pa Maha embodies Buddhist teachings about mindfulness, moderation, and respect for the environment. PHOTO: THE NATION



The bottle caps, too, are repurposed to form decorative mosaics across walls and pillars. Every structure, from the flooring to the spires of the chedi (stupa), showcases a balance of creativity, sustainability, and spiritual devotion.

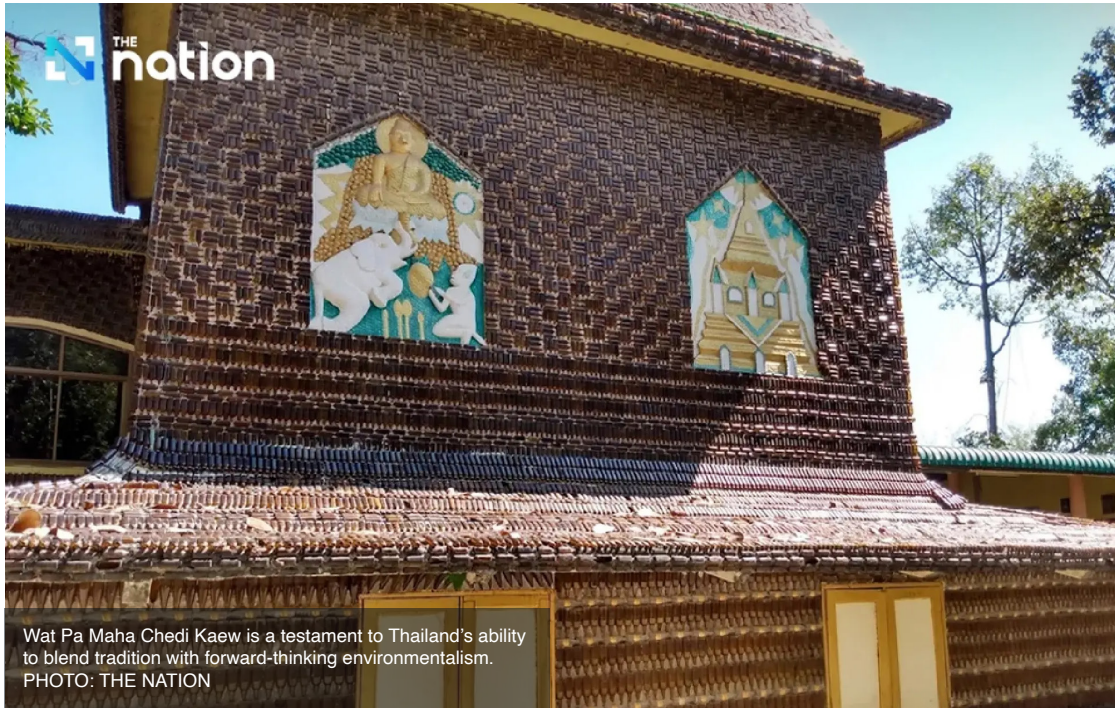
Beyond its striking appearance, Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew carries a deeper message. It embodies Buddhist teachings about mindfulness, moderation, and respect for the environment.

The monks’ initiative illustrates how environmental consciousness can harmoniously coexist with faith, inspiring visitors to see beauty and purpose in what others discard as waste.

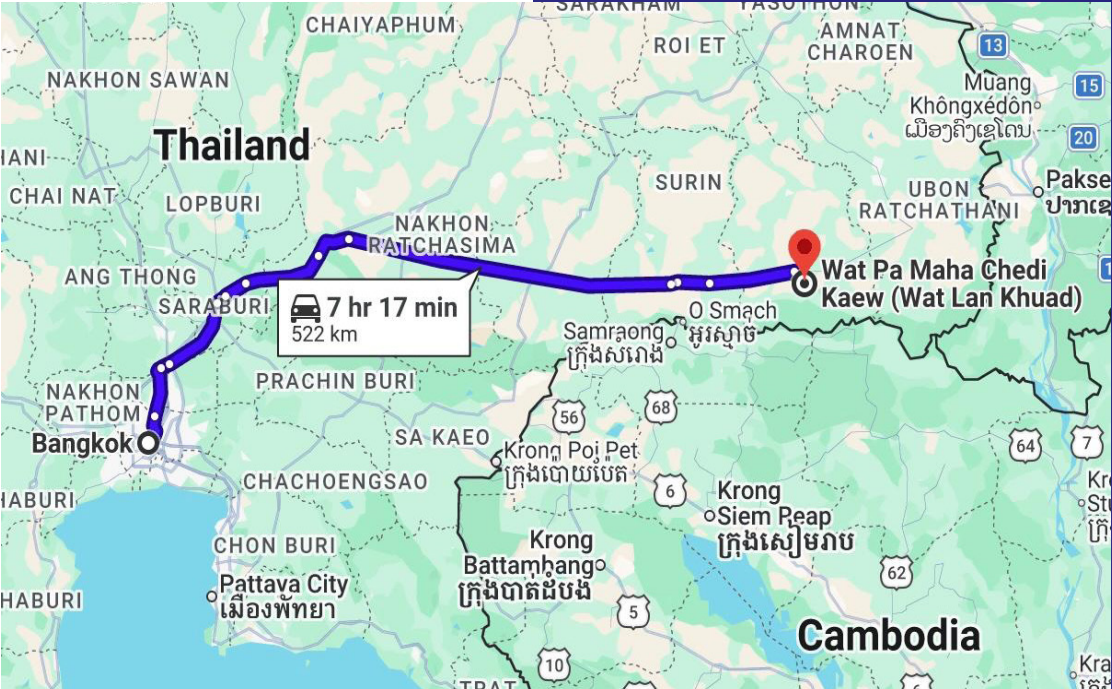
Today, the temple welcomes tourists, photographers, and eco-enthusiasts from around the world. Visitors are captivated not only by its shimmering aesthetics but also by the powerful reminder it offers: that sustainability can be both sacred and stunning.

Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew has since become a model of green architecture and spiritual innovation, a living testament to Thailand’s ability to blend tradition with forward-thinking environmentalism.

As the sunlight filters through thousands of glass bottles, the temple glows, a symbol of renewal, resilience, and the transformative power of faith.



Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew is a testament to Thailand’s ability to blend tradition with forward-thinking environmentalism.  
PHOTO: THE NATION



## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

[CLICK HERE](#)

Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew (Temple of a Million Bottles) is located 522km (324 miles) from Bangkok.

The easiest way to get to Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaew from Bangkok (Suvarnabhumi or Don Mueang) is to fly to Ubon Ratchathani Airport (UBP), take a taxi or bus 101km southwest to Khun Han, and walk to the temple.

From there, travel to Khun Han District, with the most convenient option being to hire a private taxi or rent a car at the airport. The drive to Khun Han takes about 1.5 to 2 hours.

If you’re on a tight budget, take a local bus from Ubon Ratchathani or from Si Sa Ket town south towards Khun Han (Highway 221 and 2111).

The temple is located in Khun Han town, about 15 minutes off Route 24. If travelling by a local bus, it will drop you near a roundabout in the centre of Khun Han. From there, it is a short 10-minute walk to the west side of the circle.





The Dinh Bang Communal House stands as a testament to an ancient architectural and design masterwork. PHOTO: VIET NAM NEWS







Dinh Bang Communal House is where many community activities take place, mostly during spring. PHOTO: VIET NAM NEWS

TU SON CITY, BAC NINH

# Visit the ancestors’ home of the Ly Dynasty, the first rulers of the independent kingdom of the Great Viet

BY NGUYEN MY HA  
Viet Nam News

In the middle of an extraordinarily hot summer, when you step into the shade of Dinh Bang Communal House, it feels as if several degrees have been lowered. The current communal house was built with hardwood during the Latter Le Dynasty in the 18th century and took more than 30 years to complete.

Dinh Bang House has been lauded by many as the most beautiful communal house in Vietnam, which was built on a 丁 floor plan according to the Han script.

It’s summertime, and there aren’t many activities going on in the House because the weather gets too hot. The busiest time is when the House gets filled with locals and children visiting from afar, who come back for the village’s festival on the 12th of the second lunar month.

Do Duc Thuan, 48, takes his family of four from Ho Chi Minh City to visit Dinh Bang. He said, “I take my family back here for a visit every summer as I am originally from Thuan Thanh District here in Bac Ninh Province.” His children followed a cousin to light incense and pray to the village’s gods. The House has become familiar with them over the years, and they love it.

Having lived and worked in Ho Chi Minh City for 20 years, with a job in educational services, Thuan said the trips were mostly for his children to visit his parents and relatives, but they also got to learn about the history of the Kinh Bac land, where many beautiful pagodas and temples, craft and quan ho villages are located.

**Unique and grandiose**  
The House has an ornate roofing structure, with four huge raised corners. The roof takes up 5.5m of the total height of the structure. Each roof corner has an elegant yet grandiose raised tip, ornately carved.

The corner curves of the roof reach out farthest in all the communal houses and pagodas around Vietnam.

The House is actually a stilt house on a raised foundation built with blue karst stones. Six lines of wooden pillars on the width and 10 lines of wooden pillars on the length stand on firm blue karst stones.

Inside the House, locals congregate to pay tribute to three Gods of the village: Cao Son Dai Vua (the Great Land God), Thuy Ba Dai Vua (The Great Water God) and Bach Le Dai Vua (God of Planting). They oversee the locals’ agricultural work and harvests, and once a year, in the last lunar month, Dinh Bang villagers hold a traditional festival to pray for enough rain and sunshine and a bumper crop.

Names of the eight kings of the Ly Dynasty (1010-1200AD) were worshipped in the Eight Ly King Temple. In 1948, as the rise of Vietnamese patriotic movement sprung up in the country, the French had to withdraw its forces and when they were not able to hold on to occupying the Bac Ninh citadel, they destroyed the temple before they left.

All the Ly kings' name placards were removed and placed on a new altar at the Communal House.

Besides the agricultural gods, six other founding fathers, who rebuilt the village in the 15th century, are revered, with the House becoming not just a place of pilgrimage for Bac Ninh Province people, but also all Vietnamese.

“We love coming here every day for work,” says Nguyen Kim An, 68, a resident of Tinh Cau Ward in Dinh Bang District. “It’s my seventh year, my wife and I both enjoy this work. Today, we get a



Nguyễn Kim An makes sure every day when he’s on duty to make all the altars ready for lighting incense and greet visitors should they have a query or two. PHOTO: VIET NAM NEWS

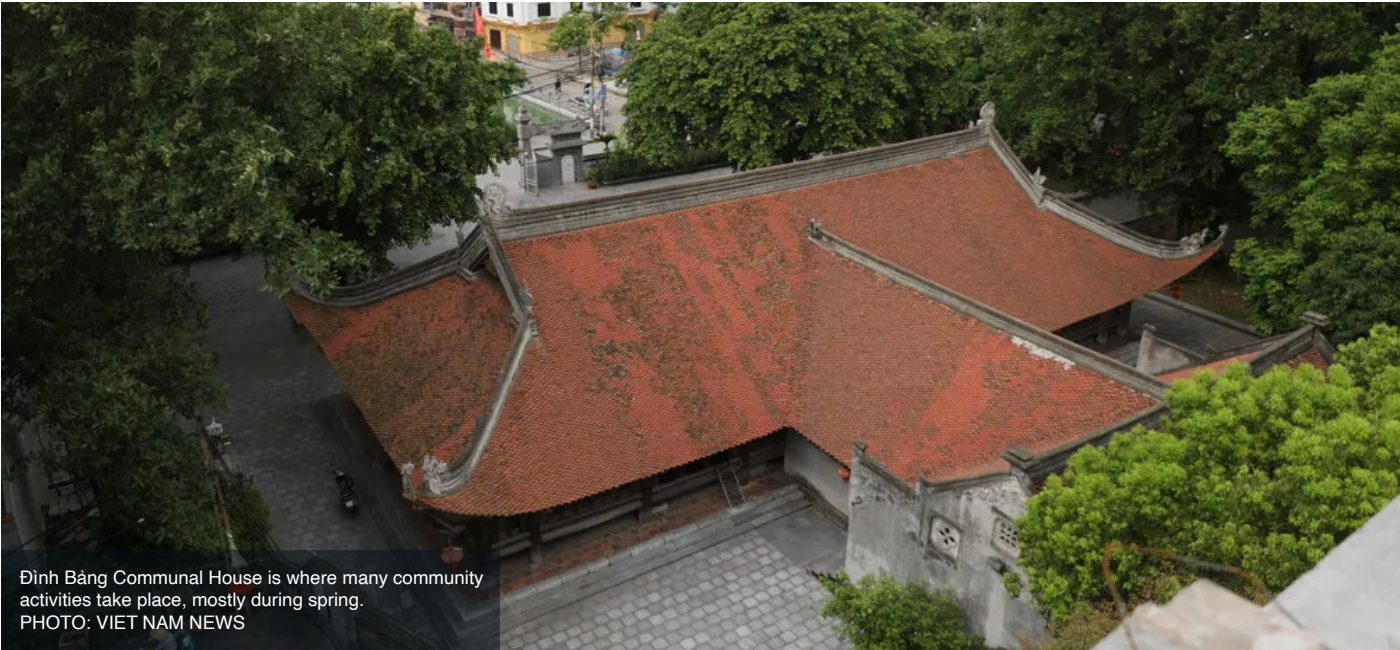
stipend for doing this every day, but we started out volunteering and we loved it.”

Members of the local Elderly Club, whose job is to clean the altar, light incense and keep the House clean, guide and answer questions from visitors if requested. Any donations are written down in a big book and the donors receive a recognition certificate with their names and the amount donated.

**Peace at last**  
Mr An says he served in the army from 1974 until 1979. He was deployed to Da Lat in 1975 and served until he de-mobbed in 1979 to go home and live as a farmer.

From 1979 until 1988, his family of five worked hard, but two more wars in the northern and southwestern borders drained most of the agricultural wealth and gains of the population.

“We grew rice on our allotted 3,600 sq m field,” An said. “Our household makes over a tonne of rice each crop, and we have two each year. But we as a family were still struggling.”



Dinh Bang Communal House is where many community activities take place, mostly during spring. PHOTO: VIET NAM NEWS



As the country followed a strict communal cooperative format, all members had to give all their crops to the cooperative. Their daily work was converted into daily pay, which equalled a few hundred grammes of rice a day, and the grains were not sufficient for the family to thrive.

In 1988, the country’s leadership approved a new format that allotted land to farmers to cultivate throughout the year. They would have to give back a designated amount of rice, but they can keep the rest of the crop for the family.

It sounds simple today, but this method has become key to all the agricultural success and prosperity of Vietnam today. Farmers love their land and fields; they work their best to raise productivity on each strip of rice field. Between 1988 and 1991, Vietnamese farmers put an end to the chronic food shortages in the country and Vietnam became second only to Thailand in rice exports.



Roof motifs on the edge of one of the pavilions in Đình Bảng.  
PHOTO: VIET NAM NEWS



Teenage children of a family in Hồ Chí Minh City visit the Đình Bảng Communal House in Bắc Ninh Province.  
PHOTO: VIET NAM NEWS

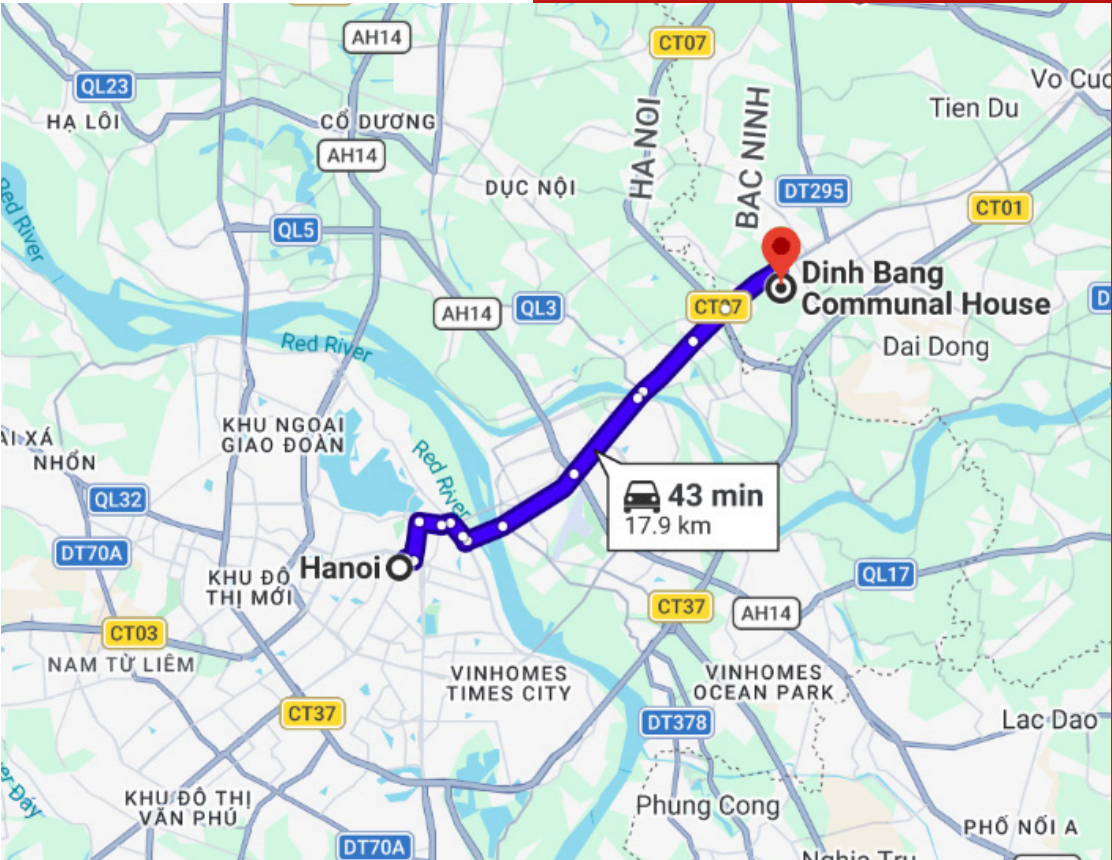
Today, village roads in Đình Bảng are clean with transport signals, and the people have prospered as they work hard, not only planting rice, but also other crops, including vegetables and fruit.

“Before Covid, we received international visitors every day. Most of them were from France,” An said. “They travelled around the country, then come here as the last stop before they depart at Nội Bài International Airport.”

The Communal House is huge, its ancient trees give ample shady space and local performers serenade visitors with quan ho songs to give visitors a warm feeling before they leave. The folk song “My dear, stay, don’t go” is a perfect way to remember this land.

A trip to Đình Bảng can be scheduled to visit Dong Ho Folk Painting village, also in the province, or But Thap Pagoda.

*Note: The Ly and Le are two of Vietnam’s most significant historical dynasties. The Ly Dynasty (1010–1225) unified the nation after Chinese rule, establishing the capital at Thăng Long (Hanoi) and making Buddhism the state religion. The Le Dynasty (1428–1789) followed later, pushing borders southwards and shifting the state towards Confucianism.*



## A NOTE FOR TRAVELLERS

[CLICK HERE](#)

Đình Bảng Communal House (Đình Đình Bảng) is located in Tu Son city, Bắc Ninh province, about 20-30km north of central Hanoi.

You can easily reach it from Hanoi by renting a car or a motorbike. From Hanoi, cross the Chuong Duong Bridge, follow Nguyen Van Cu > Ngo Gia Tu Ha Huy Tap > Dang Phuc Thong, and continue onto National Highway 1A.

Turn right at the Km 15/Km 16 milestone to enter Đình Bảng village. Travel time is 30-45 minutes, depending on the traffic.

If you’re going by public bus, go to Long Bien Bus Station in Hanoi and take Bus No. 54 or Bus No. 203. Ask the driver to drop you off near Tu Son/ Ha Huy Tap Street.

From there, hail a local xe om (motorbike taxi) or regular taxi to complete the short distance to the communal house.





People riding a boat on a moat around Himeji Castle, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in Himeji, Hyogo prefecture on June 12, 2022. PHOTO: AFP

# A peek into the rich kaleidoscope of Asia’s heritage

BY SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

Asia is a treasure trove of cultural and natural wonders, home to some of the world’s most spectacular heritage sites that tell the stories of ancient civilisations, diverse traditions, and extraordinary landscapes.

From the mist-shrouded temples of Cambodia to the lush, terraced mountains of the Philippines, each heritage spot offers a window into the region’s rich history, spirituality, and natural beauty.

Whether it is an ancient city that once thrived as a bustling trade hub, a sacred mountain that has inspired pilgrims for centuries, or a vast forest that shelters rare wildlife, these heritage spots are not only a source of national pride for their countries but also a shared heritage of humanity.

These are, of course, tourist attractions, but in every measure they are also living records of human

achievement, preserved for future generations to celebrate and learn from.

Here’s a brief overview of some of Asia’s most iconic UNESCO World Heritage Sites, each with its unique charm and significance.

## Agra Fort, India (1983)

Not so far from one of the wonders of the world in Agra, the Taj Mahal, also known as a testament to undying love, is a historical fort called the Agra Fort. The fort was famously known to be the main residence of the Mughal Dynasty till 1638, when the capital was shifted from Agra to Delhi.

The Agra Fort, also known as the “Fort Rouge” and “Qila-i-Akbari”, is a huge red-sandstone fort, whose construction was started by the Mughal Emperor Akbar, and further built by his grandson, Emperor Shah Jahan.

Enclosed within the fortress and its walls that run for about 2.5km, lies an imperial city of the Mughal rulers and is home to the Jahangir Palace and the Khas Mahal, along with intricately designed audience halls and two breathtaking walls.



Foreign tourists riding an elephant during a sightseeing tour in the ancient city of Sigiriya on December 2, 2011. PHOTO: AFP

## Ancient City of Sigiriya, Sri Lanka (1982)

An ancient rock fortress nestled in lush greenery and built on a massive, 600-foot (182m) high granite peak. It is believed by many that the fortress was once resided by the mythical King Sri Lankeshwara Maha Ravana, a powerful monarch from the epic Ramayana.

However, it was constructed by King Kassapa I in the 5th century CE. It includes a palace, along with gardens, reservoirs, and frescoes.

As one of the best preserved examples of ancient urban planning, the fortress is famous for its intricate rock paintings of celestial dancers or apsaras and a stunning gate designed in the shape of a lion.

The fortress is also one of the very few of the time period that included sophisticated water management systems.

## Archaeological Heritage of Niah National Park’s Caves Complex, Malaysia (2024)

The Niah caves are not just famous for the lush rainforest they are surrounded by or the breathtaking views, but they are also rich with historical evidence of the lives led by ancient ancestors, dating back to thousands of years.

While one of the most famous relics found there is the “deep skull”, which is the skull of a young adolescent dating back to 65,000 years ago, making it the oldest modern human remains in Southeast Asia.

Apart from that, other discoveries were also made, including a variety of stone tools, wooden coffins, and burial artefacts among other things. These incredible discoveries have offered people a unique glimpse at human history and culture, allowing us to better understand ancient technology, adaptation techniques, lifestyles, and belief systems.

Some of the ancient traditions are still observed by local communities today, for example, molong is a tradition of “taking only what is needed” when harvesting produce from the animals that share the habitat.



File photo of the Miagao Church, also known as the Santo Tomas de Villanueva Parish Church, in Iloilo, Philippines. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site recognised for its unique architectural style. PHOTO: PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

## Baroque Churches of the Philippines, (1993)

A group of four Roman Catholic churches, constructed between the 16th and 18th centuries during the Spanish period, have a unique architectural style which shows how Filipino craftsmen interpret European Baroque while keeping the physical conditions of the Philippines in mind.

The churches, located in Manila, Santa Maria, Paoay and Miag-ao, all have squat, monumental, and massive appearances, and have had a significant impact on churches built later in the region.

These churches are distinguished by their unique “Earthquake Baroque” architecture – massive buttresses, thick walls, and robust facades designed to withstand the frequent earthquakes in the region. Their design blends European Baroque styles with local materials and indigenous motifs, including floral, animal, and geometric carvings.



A statue is seen at Borobudur Temple, the world’s largest Buddhist monument and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in Magelang, Central Java. PHOTO: AFP

## Borobudur Temple Compounds, Indonesia (1991)

Built during the reign of the Syailendra Dynasty in the 8th and 9th centuries AD, the monument is located in Kedu Valley, Central Java. This 1,200-year-old temple is the biggest Buddhist temple in the world, and is known to have taken about 100 years to complete.

The main temple is built into a domed hemispherical structure or a stupa containing different types of sacred relics.

What is truly incredible is the vertical division of the temple which many believe signify the division of the Universe in Buddhist cosmology.

Just as the universe is believed to be divided into three superimposing spheres, kamadhatu, rupadhatu and arupadhatu – representing the spheres of desires where we are bound to our desires, the



sphere of forms where we abandon our desires but are still bound to name and form, and the sphere of formlessness where there is neither name nor form – the temple is divided into the base, the five square terraces, and the three circular platforms, each representing one of the spheres.

The whole structure shows a unique mix of the very central ideas of ancestor worship, related to the idea of a terraced mountain, combined with the Buddhist concept of attaining Nirvana.

**Buddhist Ruins of Takht-i-Bahi and Neighbouring City Remains at Sahr-i-Bahlol, Pakistan (1980)**

The monastic complex of Takht-i-Bahi is one of the most prominent historical and cultural relics of the region. Due to its position high up on a hill, it had survived successive invasions, and has remained well preserved.

Founded in the early 1st century, the ruins now comprise a main stupa court, votive stupas court, a group of three stupas, a monastic quadrangle with meditation cells, conference halls, covered stepped passageways, and other secular buildings.

The other component, the Neighbouring City remains at Sahr-i-Bahlol, are the remnants of an ancient fortified town located approximately 5km away.



**Gyeongju Historic Areas, South Korea (2000)**

This particular area is home to some incredible historic features and royal relics that offer an exceptional peek into the ancient lives during the Silla Dynasty. The areas consist of five different sub-areas of Mount Namsan, Wolseong, Tumuli, Hwangnyongsa Temple, and the Fortress Belt.

Some of the artefacts from the Silla culture include gold crowns, jewellery and even some weaponry, which are exhibited at the Gyeongju National Museum.

The Mount Namsan Belt, which stands at the north of the city, consists of a fortress and tombs along with ruins of numerous temples, statues, pagodas, and stone lanterns. The Wolseong Park Belt on the other hand, includes the ruins of a palace, the Gyerim woodland, the Anapji pond and the Cheomseongdae Observatory.

The Tumuli Park belt consists of three sets of royal tombs and the Sanseong Belt includes defensive

structures and Myeonghwan Mountain Fortress. Finally, it is the Hwangnyongsa Belt that contains two Buddhist temples, Bunhwangsa Temple and its pagoda from 634 CE.

It also has the ruins of Hwangnyongsa Temple, the biggest temple ever built in Korea.

The varied structures and relics are what makes this a unique spot, allowing for a multifaceted look into a very different time.



**Ha Long Bay, Vietnam (1994)**

Ha Long Bay – Cat Ba Archipelago stands as the largest and most renowned example of marine-invaded limestone karsts, making it one of the world’s most significant regions for fengcong (clusters of conical peaks) and fenglin (isolated tower formations) karst.

The area is further distinguished by its stunning landscape, which is characterised by diverse, typical ecosystems, and possessing seven adjacent tropical and subtropical marine-island ecosystems.

While renowned for its marvelous seascape and breathtaking shades of green, Ha Long Bay is home to some of the most stunning rugged islets, and communities who have lived on the water for centuries.

Thus, the mystical beauty of Ha Long Bay makes it a bucket list attraction.



**Himeji-jo (Himeji Castle), Japan (1993)**

Known as the “White Heron Castle” due to its brilliant white exterior that resembles a bird taking flight, the castle is a masterpiece of Japanese feudal architecture.

It stands atop a hill in Himeji City, featuring a complex network of 83 buildings, including imposing main keeps, fortified walls, and labyrinthine pathways designed for defence.

Dating back to the 14th century and extensively renovated in the 17th century, Himeji Castle is an exceptional example of early Japanese castle architecture, remaining remarkably intact through centuries of wars and natural disasters.

The Himeji-jo also famously survived World War II bombings largely unscathed, even though much of the surrounding area was destroyed.



**Historic City of Ayutthaya, Thailand (1991)**

The Historic City of Ayutthaya is a sprawling complex of ancient temples, towering prangs (reliquary towers), and grand monasteries set amidst lush greenery and winding rivers.

Once the prosperous capital of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya from 1350 to 1767, it was a thriving hub of commerce, diplomacy, and culture, connecting the East and West.

The city’s strategic location on an island surrounded by three rivers made it a formidable fortress and a bustling trade centre.

Though much of Ayutthaya was destroyed during a Burmese invasion in 1767, its majestic ruins – such as Wat Mahathat with its famous Buddha head entwined in tree roots – remain a testament to its past grandeur.



**Historic Mosque City of Bagerhat, Bangladesh (1985)**

The Historic Mosque City of Bagerhat is a remarkable medieval Islamic city featuring a unique blend of Bengali and Islamic architecture.

Located at the confluence of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers, this ancient city is characterised by its grand mosques, tombs, bridges, and reservoirs, all built using local baked bricks that give the structures a distinct reddish hue.

The city’s centrepiece, one that is taught to every school-going child in Bangladesh as a testament to the elegant yet lasting style of the Bengal Sultanate period, is the Sixty Dome Mosque or Shat Gombuj Mosque, an expansive structure with 77 squat domes (despite its name) and massive stone columns.

Founded in the 15th century by Turkish general Khan Jahan Ali, Bagerhat served as an important frontier settlement for Islamic expansion in the region. Despite being a thriving city in the past, it was abandoned due to riverine erosion and siltation, which led to the gradual engulfing of many of its structures by thick mangrove forests.

This natural reclamation kept many of the city’s ancient monuments preserved until rediscovery.



**Hoi An Ancient Town, Vietnam (1999)**

Hoi An Ancient Town is a remarkably well-preserved trading port dating back to the 15th century. Nestled along the Thu Bon River, Hoi An is known for its narrow, winding streets lined with centuries-old merchant houses, vibrant yellow facades, and a mix of Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, and European architectural styles.

Hoi An used to be a bustling international trade hub, attracting merchants from Asia and Europe who exchanged goods such as silk, spices, ceramics, and precious metals. Its decline as a major port in the 19th century, following the silting of the Thu Bon River, inadvertently preserved its ancient charm.

Iconic structures such as the Japanese Covered Bridge, adorned with carved guardian statues, and the Assembly Halls of Chinese merchants, reflect the town’s multicultural heritage.

Hoi An is famous for its monthly Lantern Festival, during which the town is illuminated by colourful lanterns, and the streets are filled with traditional performances, making it seem like a scene right out of a Disney movie.





In a photo taken on May 29, 2020, hikers walk across a bridge on Hallasan mountain, or Mount Halla, on Jeju island. Hallasan is South Korea's highest mountain at 1,947m. PHOTO: AFP

### Jeju Volcanic Island and Lava Tubes, South Korea (2007)

Home to the iconic “Haenyeo” or “sea women” – a unique community of female free divers, who have traditionally harvested seafood without diving equipment for generations – Jeju Volcanic Island and Lava Tubes is a stunning natural wonder formed by volcanic activity over two million years.

Dominated by Hallasan, South Korea’s tallest volcano, the island is characterised by dramatic landscapes; lush forests, rugged coastlines, and unique geological formations. Among its most famous features are the extensive lava tube systems, such as the Manjanggul Lava Tube, one of the longest and best-preserved in the world. These underground passages, formed by flowing molten lava, showcase stunning rock formations.

Geologically, Jeju Island is a hotspot volcanic island, meaning it was formed as magma from the Earth’s mantle erupted through the ocean floor. Its rich biodiversity and rare volcanic landforms make it a treasure for geological studies.



A couple of Asian elephants roaming the Kaeng Krachan Forest in Thailand. PHOTO: SUNEE SAKSEAU/ UNESCO

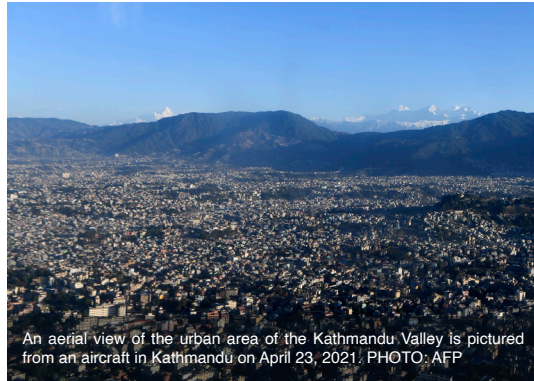
### Kaeng Krachan Forest Complex, Thailand (2021)

Located along the Thai-Myanmar border, the complex is part of the Tenasserim Mountain Range and serves as a critical biodiversity hotspot.

As Thailand’s largest protected forest area, spanning a vast landscape of dense evergreen forests, mist-shrouded mountains, and winding rivers, it encompasses three national parks – Kaeng Krachan, Kui Buri, and Chaloe Phrakiat Thai Prachan – providing a sanctuary for a wide variety of flora and fauna, including endangered species such as the Indochinese tiger, Asian elephant, and the rare Siamese crocodile.

Geologically, the forest complex is a region of rugged, forested mountains and diverse ecosystems, ranging from tropical rainforests at lower elevations to montane forests higher up.

This rich ecological diversity is driven by the complex’s unique climatic conditions and varied topography. The forest complex is also home to one of Asia’s largest known populations of the critically endangered giant Asian honey bee or *Apis dorsata*, which forms massive, hanging colonies on tall trees.



An aerial view of the urban area of the Kathmandu Valley is pictured from an aircraft in Kathmandu on April 23, 2021. PHOTO: AFP

### Kathmandu Valley, Nepal (1979)

Kathmandu Valley is a magnificent cultural landscape surrounded by green hills and dominated by seven groups of historic monuments and buildings.

These include ancient palace squares (Durbar Squares) in Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Patan, as well as sacred temples and stupas like Swayambhunath (the Monkey Temple) and Pashupatinath, one of the holiest Hindu temples.

The valley’s architecture showcases a remarkable fusion of Hindu and Buddhist artistry, with intricately carved woodwork, towering pagodas, and sacred courtyards.

Historically, Kathmandu Valley was a vital cultural and trade crossroads between India and Tibet, flourishing as an artistic and religious centre for more than a thousand years.

Its ancient cities were ruled by the Malla kings, who were great patrons of art and architecture, leaving a legacy that endures today.



In this photo taken Dec 2, 2010, a Komodo dragon searches the shore area of Komodo island for prey. PHOTO: AFP

### Komodo National Park, Indonesia (1991)

Established in 1980 to protect the iconic Komodo dragon (the world’s largest living lizard), the park is of immense ecological significance, supporting a unique ecosystem where prehistoric reptiles roam

alongside a rich diversity of marine life, including manta rays, sea turtles, and vibrant coral species.

The park’s volcanic origin is evident in its rugged terrain and active geothermal features. Komodo National Park is a rugged paradise of steep volcanic islands, turquoise waters, and pristine coral reefs.

Located within the Lesser Sunda Islands, the park is renowned for its dramatic landscapes, featuring rocky hills covered in savannah grasslands, lush forests, and picturesque beaches with pink sand – a rare natural phenomenon caused by a mix of white sand and red coral fragments.



This picture taken on Oct 22, 2017, shows a Common Raven (Corvus Corax) flying past the Melaka Straits Mosque during sunrise in Melaka. Found at a man-made island named Pulau Melaka, it is an unparalleled Mosque fabricate at the shoreline of the Strait and at the water level of the ocean. PHOTO: AFP

### Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Strait of Malacca, Malaysia (2008)

Melaka and George Town, located on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia are celebrated for their vibrant multicultural heritage and well-preserved architecture. These historic port cities, strategically situated along the Strait of Malacca, have been vital trade hubs for centuries, connecting the East and the West.

Melaka is characterised by its colonial charm, with iconic red-painted buildings like Christ Church and the Stadthuys, reflecting its Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial past. The winding streets of Jonker Walk showcase a blend of Chinese shophouses, ornate temples like Cheng Hoon Teng (Malaysia’s oldest Chinese temple), and the 16th-century A Famosa fortress.

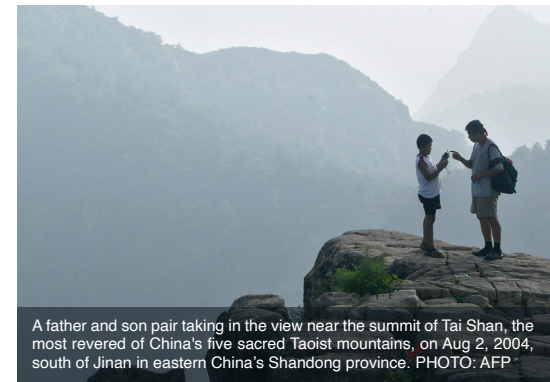
George Town, on Penang Island, is a living museum with its eclectic mix of British colonial architecture, colourful Peranakan (Straits Chinese) houses, and bustling Little India. Notable landmarks include the grand Pinang Peranakan Mansion, Kapitan Keling Mosque, and the iconic Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (Blue Mansion).

Historically, both cities were critical nodes in the spice trade, attracting merchants from China, India, the Middle East, and Europe, resulting in a unique cultural fusion that is still evident today. Melaka and George Town are also homes to Nyonya cuisine, a distinct culinary tradition combining Chinese, Malay, and Indonesian flavours, developed by the Peranakan community over centuries.

### Mount Taishan, China (1987)

With more than 6,600 stone inscriptions and tablets, Mount Taishan is the world’s largest open-air museum of ancient Chinese calligraphy. It is a majestic mountain located in Shandong Province, and is celebrated for its natural beauty and immense

cultural significance. The mountain is characterised by steep, granite cliffs, ancient pine forests, cascading waterfalls, and scenic pathways lined with stone inscriptions. The summit offers panoramic views, often surrounded by a sea of clouds, creating an ethereal atmosphere that has inspired poets and emperors for centuries.



A father and son pair taking in the view near the summit of Tai Shan, the most revered of China's five sacred Taoist mountains, on Aug 2, 2004, south of Jinan in eastern China's Shandong province. PHOTO: AFP

Historically, Mount Taishan is one of China’s “Five Great Mountains” and has been a sacred site for more than 3,000 years. Over time, the mountain became a spiritual centre for both Confucianism and Taoism, with ancient temples such as the Azure Cloud Temple (Bixia Temple) and the Dai Temple, which features intricate murals and centuries-old cypress trees. Geologically, Mount Taishan is primarily composed of ancient gneiss and granite, some of which date back more than 2.5 billion years, making it one of the oldest mountain formations in China.

### Mountain Railways of India, India (1999)

The Mountain Railways of India, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, comprise three historic railway lines: Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, Nilgiri Mountain Railway, and Kalka-Shimla Railway.

These railways traverse breathtaking mountainous landscapes, with narrow-gauge tracks winding through lush forests, steep cliffs, and mist-covered valleys. Built during the British colonial era (1858 to 1947), they are remarkable feats of engineering, overcoming challenging terrain with innovative designs like sharp curves, spiral loops, and zigzag tracks.

Geologically, these railways navigate diverse mountain ranges: the Eastern Himalayas for Darjeeling, the Western Ghats for Nilgiri, and the Shivalik Hills for Kalka-Shimla.

Each offers panoramic views, from tea gardens and alpine forests to dramatic rocky cliffs. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway’s steam-powered “Toy Train” is one of the oldest functioning steam locomotives in the world, and its Ghoom Station is the highest railway station in India.

These heritage trains continue to operate, providing a nostalgic journey through stunning natural landscapes.



**Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape, Mongolia (2004)**

The Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape is a vast, picturesque grassland along the Orkhon River, surrounded by rolling hills and rugged mountains.

This sweeping valley, with its lush pastures and winding rivers, has been a cradle of nomadic civilisation for more than 2,000 years, serving as the heart of the Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan.

The valley is dotted with ancient ruins, including the capital of the Mongol Empire, Karakorum, and the Erdene Zuu Monastery, Mongolia’s oldest surviving Buddhist monastery.

Historically, Orkhon Valley was a crossroads of trade, culture, and power, hosting the empires of the Turks, Uighurs, and Mongols. Its strategic location along the ancient Silk Road allowed for a rich exchange of ideas and goods between East and West.

Orkhon Valley is still home to traditional nomadic herders who maintain a centuries-old way of life, living in portable felt yurts (gers) and moving with their livestock across the open steppe, just as their ancestors did.



**Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras, Philippines (1995)**

The Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras are a unique agricultural landscape carved into the steep mountains of Northern Luzon.

These terraces, built over more than 2,000 years ago without modern tools, relying solely on the knowledge and cooperative labour by the indigenous Ifugao people, are ingeniously engineered with stone and mud walls, forming lush, green steps that follow the natural contours of the mountains.

Irrigated by a complex system of canals fed by mountain springs and forests, they are a remarkable example of sustainable, high-altitude farming.

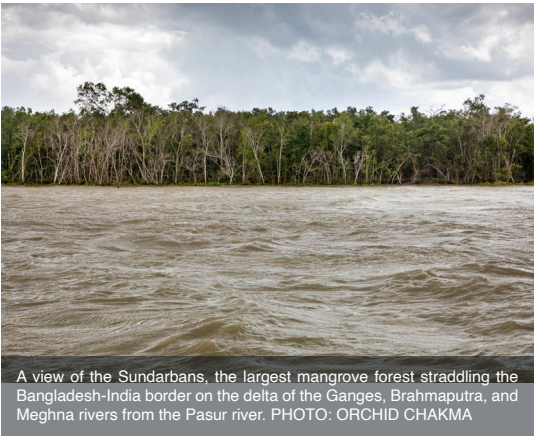
Historically, the rice terraces represent a living cultural tradition, showcasing the ancient agricultural techniques passed down through generations of Ifugao farmers. Unlike other ancient wonders, they remain a functional agricultural system, still cultivated today using traditional methods.

**Shirakami-Sanchi, Japan (1993)**

Shirakami-Sanchi is a vast, untouched mountainous forest spanning the Akita and Aomori prefectures. Dominated by ancient, primeval beech forests, the area is characterised by rugged mountains, deep valleys, clear streams, and dramatic waterfalls, creating a pristine natural landscape.

These beech forests are a rare remnant of the cool-temperate forests that once covered much of northern Japan but have now mostly disappeared due to human activity.

Geologically, Shirakami-Sanchi’s mountainous terrain is the result of ancient volcanic and tectonic activity, which shaped its dramatic cliffs and deep gorges. It is home to diverse wildlife, including the endangered Asian black bear, Japanese serow, and a wide variety of bird species.



**Sundarbans, Bangladesh and India (1997)**

The Sundarbans is the world’s largest mangrove forest, sprawling across the coastal regions of Bangladesh and India.

With an intricate network of tidal waterways, mudflats, and dense, salt-tolerant mangrove trees, the Sundarbans is a mesmerising, ever-shifting landscape shaped by the powerful forces of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers as they meet the Bay of Bengal.

The forest is known for its thick canopy of sundari trees, from which it gets its name, and its lush, swampy terrain that is regularly flooded by tidal waves.

Geologically, the Sundarbans is a deltaic region, constantly reshaped by the deposition of silt carried by the major rivers. It is a critical habitat for a wide range of wildlife, including the iconic Bengal tiger, saltwater crocodiles, spotted deer, and a diverse array of bird species.

**ABOUT THE WRITER:**

**Syeda Afrin Tarannum** is a Bangladeshi writer and sub-editor based in Dhaka. She is a digital reporter and sub-editor for Asia News Network, a sub-editor at The Daily Star, and a fellow for Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Media Programme Asia.

**Temple and Cemetery of Confucius and the Kong Family Mansion in Qufu, China (1994)**

The Temple and Cemetery of Confucius and the Kong Family Mansion in Qufu in China’s Shandong Province, are a remarkable tribute to Confucius, the great Chinese philosopher.

The Temple of Confucius, with its grand halls, towering ancient cypress trees, and exquisite stone carvings, is one of the largest temple complexes in China, featuring nearly 500 rooms adorned with intricate calligraphy and reliefs celebrating Confucian teachings.

Adjacent to the temple, the Kong Family Mansion was the historical residence of Confucius’ direct descendants, showcasing traditional Chinese architecture with beautiful courtyards, ceremonial halls, and a vast collection of historical artefacts.

The Cemetery of Confucius, also known as the Confucius Forest, is a tranquil wooded area containing over 100,000 tombstones of Confucius’s descendants, with the philosopher’s own modest tomb standing at its heart.

Historically, this site has been a major centre of Confucian scholarship for more than two millennia, attracting emperors and scholars who honoured Confucius’s teachings. Qufu has hosted 12 imperial visits from Chinese emperors who came to pay homage to Confucius and offer sacrifices at the temple.

*Source: UNESCO World Heritage Centre. (n.d.). World Heritage List. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>*

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# Our next Asian Heritage e-book

There isn't a land in our part of the world that doesn't have a history, and it teaches us that nothing is etched in stone. The fables of our countries will evolve, so will the lore of the land. Legacies will change and so will customs and traditions as nations persevere to craft their own destinies.

Heritage, however, will endure. And the quest of the individual to trace their roots, find answers to what shaped their being, their traditions, their customs and cultures, will mean heritage will always be treasured. For it is heritage that shapes our present, and will shape our future.

We, at Asia News Network, are working on a second edition of this book and will be releasing it in the months to come. Here's a preview of some of the sites we're looking to write about:



- ANN Editorial Team

The Daily Star

KUENSEL  
THAT THE PEOPLE SHALL BE INFORMED

Borneo Bulletin  
THE INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER BY ONLINE INDONESIAN, SABAH AND SARAWAK

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