

6 of the best ONLY-IN-ASIA EXPERIENCES

Escorted tours in Asia are packed with truly unforgettable moments, says **Joanna Booth**

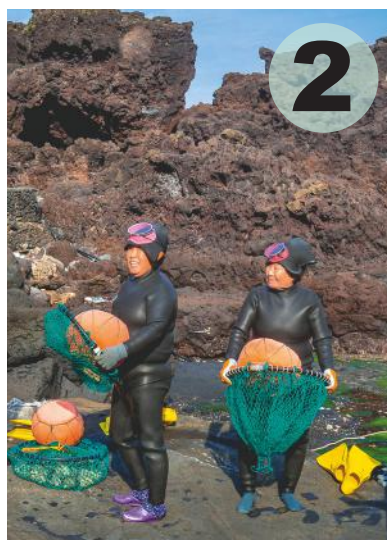
Immersive escorted tours are filled with wonder, from meeting South Korea's female free divers to learning the lifestyle of semi-nomadic eagle hunters in Mongolia. They open the door to the continent's festivals, cuisines and cultures – a more enticing selling point than simple sightseeing. All prices are per person, based on two sharing, and do not include international flights unless stated.



Celebrate the Nalakhhar Festival in Bhutan

Bhutan's sacred festivals are central to its culture, creating places for communities to come together and for Buddhist traditions to be preserved. Unlike some of the larger and more famous tsechus, the Nalakhhar Festival in Bumthang isn't on the tourist circuit, so travellers on this Undiscovered Destinations tour will be surrounded by villagers as they watch monks perform masked cham dances portraying deities and demons, and see locals present folk dances and songs. This women-only tour has a female guide, female-run homestays and visits a Buddhist nunnery, giving a unique perspective on this beautiful Himalayan kingdom.

Book it: Undiscovered Destinations' 12-day Bhutan Festival Cultural Tour starts from £3,595, including transfers, all meals and visas.
undiscovered-destinations.com



Meet female free divers in Korea

There's more than one way of growing old gracefully, as visitors to Jeju, the volcanic island off South Korea's southern shore, discover. The haenyeo (women of the sea) don't retire or slow down; these extraordinary free divers spend hours diving without equipment and hold their breath for over a minute to harvest seafood sustainably. On this G Adventures tour, guests sit with the women in the dramatic surroundings of Seongsan Ilchulbong (Sunrise Peak) to hear about their lives and the skills handed down through generations, over a taste of their freshly caught seafood – abalone, sea urchin, sea cucumber and sea squirt.

Book it: G Adventures' nine-day Journeys: Soul of South Korea starts from £3,399 including breakfast, some meals and transfers.
gadventures.com

Make hand-pulled noodles in China

Every sense is stimulated during this noodle-making experience in Xi'an, China. The Shaanxi province is known for biang-biang noodles: thick and bouncy in texture, taking their name from the slam of the dough against the table during the hand-pulling process. On Intrepid Travel's food-focused tour, guests hone their skills with a local family by kneading, rolling and slapping, then cooking and eating their efforts in a feast of regional ingredients. Also visiting Beijing, Chengdu and Hong Kong, travellers can tick off the Great Wall and pandas alongside Peking duck, Sichuan hot pot and dim sum.

Book it: Intrepid Travel's 10-day China Real Food Adventure starts from £1,945, including some meals.
intrepidtravel.com



Stay in a Buddhist temple in Japan

Rather than simply snapping a quick photo outside a Buddhist temple, guests on this InsideJapan Tours trip will be spiritually submerged, sleeping in traditional accommodation – think futons, tatami mats and *shoji* paper sliding doors – attending morning prayers and sitting among chanting monks amid the heady scent of incense. The temple's *shojin ryori*-style banquet is a highlight too: strictly vegetarian, seriously delicious and based around the rule of five drawn from Chinese philosophy, with variations in cooking methods, tastes and even colours. The guide will be on hand to explain everything, both at the temple in Mount Koya and on the myriad other included experiences – taking tea with a trainee geisha, a behind-the-scenes tour at a kabuki theatre, a kendo martial art lesson and a session at a traditional onsen (hot spring) baths.

Book it: InsideJapan's 12-night Hidden Japan tour starts from £4,975, including some meals, transfers and destination experiences.
insidejapantours.com



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Watch golden eagles hunt in Mongolia

Those who can't get their dog to come to heel in the park will marvel when they see a golden eagle swoop down to the gloved wrist of a hunter in splendid traditional dress. Mongolia's Kazakhs – the country's largest ethnic minority – have co-existed with these magnificent birds for hundreds of years, and the annual Golden Eagle Festival is a great opportunity to see them in action, alongside other pursuits including challenges on horseback and tug-of-war contests. This tour with Abercrombie & Kent invites guests to spend time with a Kazakh family, then visit the Gobi Desert and capital Ulaanbaatar, where Buddhist monasteries and Soviet-era blocks stand side by side.

Book it: Abercrombie & Kent's 12-day Mongolia's Golden Eagle Festival tour starts from £19,425, including all meals and transport.
abercrombiekent.com



Get nearer to nature on a farm in Vietnam

Nearly three-quarters of Vietnam's population lives in rural areas, and many use farming techniques handed on from their ancestors. Guests on this Wendy Wu Tours itinerary can get their hands dirty at Tra Que Vegetable Village, a communal farm just outside the pretty historic town of Hoi An. Donning the conical hats so signature to Vietnam, they learn about natural seaweed fertiliser sourced from local lagoons, plant their own crops and master the distinctive watering method using twin bamboo buckets carried across the shoulders, before a cooking demonstration using freshly picked produce. The tour also visits Hanoi, Halong Bay, Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta.

Book it: Wendy Wu Tours' 12-day Vietnam at a Glance starts from £2,890, with all meals, listed excursions and transfers, and including international flights.
wendywutours.co.uk



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