

Spice as nice

Laura French explores Asia's favourite foodie cities

@laurafrench121

Is there any region more renowned for its food than Asia? Wander through the streets of practically any city on the continent and you'll be hit by a fusion of aromas - smoke from a barbecue, lemongrass from a soup, cardamom from a curry, peanuts from a pad thai.

At times overpowering, at others blissful, its exotic offerings span pretty much every spice and flavour you can think of, and travelling here is a constant

adventure for the taste buds, as much as it is for the eyes.

That means picking out its key foodie hotspots is no easy feat, but we've rounded up some of the best to get you started - and help you sell this most intoxicating of regions.

▶ TOKYO, JAPAN

From fresh sushi to squidgy soba, hearty ramen to crispy tempura, Japanese food is as varied as it is tempting, and

there's a reason it's become a go-to in cities across the world.

"Any trip here is a gastronomic adventure, whether it be eating kaiseki dinner at a traditional ryokan, sampling Japanese 'fast food' in Fukuoka or tasting the street food of Osaka," says Matt Spiller, agent sales manager for InsideJapan Tours.

Central to this culinary scene is Tokyo, where you'll find more Michelin-starred restaurants than anywhere else in the

world, alongside a plethora of excellent-value, hole-in-the-wall joints selling everything from sashimi to okonomiyaki - a pancake-style dish filled with meat or shrimp that you cook yourself on a griddle at the table.

Book it: Premier Holidays offers a Tokyo Gourmet Walk through the city with lunch from £139 per person, taking clients to sample street food as they visit various family-run shops and restaurants. trade.premierholidays.co.uk →



▶ JEONJU, SOUTH KOREA

Korean food is having something of a moment right now, and it's not only about the kimchi, with barbecued meats, spicy soups, stuffed pancakes and the infamous bibimbap – a huge bowl of rice, meat, chilli and vegetables, topped with an egg – cropping up on menus across the globe.

The best spot for sampling it all? Jeonju, according to Neil Coletta, food brand and product manager for Intrepid. "As the largest city in the south west of the country, it's a bustling area filled with plenty of food stalls and options to try the likes of hotteok (sweet pancake), mandu (dumplings) and makgeolli (a milky alcoholic drink)," he says.

Book it: Intrepid Travel visits the city on its eight-day South Korea Real Food Adventure, which starts at £1,715 including some meals, accommodation, transport and a guide.

intrepidtravel.com

▶ SINGAPORE

If there's one place you think of when you hear the words 'food' and 'Asia', it's probably Singapore.

Traditional Malay, Chinese, Indian, Thai and Japanese dishes are all found here, with hawker centres scattered across the city selling everything from Hainanese chicken rice (the national dish) to barbecued pork, crispy wontons and nyonya dishes from the city's Peranakan people.

Isango! offers a three-hour

food tour that visits the wet markets, where unusual delicacies such as 'black chicken' and the preserved 'century egg' meet row upon row of aromatic, exotic spices – it's not one for the faint-hearted.

Book it: Isango!'s Good Morning Singapore – Tour with Food Tasting costs from £23 per person (available on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays).

isango.com

▶ HONG KONG

Just as big a gastronomic hit is Hong Kong, where deep-fried fish

balls, crumbling egg tarts and warm, doughy pork buns meet dishes for the more adventurous – chicken feet, snake soup and stinky tofu to name a few.

Options span cheap-as-chips street-food stalls and traditional dim sum joints to fine-dining spots such as three Michelin-starred Lung King Heen, and you'll find a whole host of international cuisines too.

With all that going on, it's little wonder the food scene here is soaring. "Over half of all our Hong Kong bookings are for our Kowloon Food Safari," says Tony

Carne, general director of Urban Adventures. "That makes it our best-selling experience in the city – proving more and more travellers are keen to skip the

five-star restaurants in favour of mixing with the locals."

Book it: Urban Adventures' three-hour Hong Kong Kowloon Food Safari starts at \$51, including a guide (food costs extra).

urbanadventures.com

▶ KERALA, INDIA

Whether it's a crispy samosa, a crepe-like dosa or a rich, spicy tikka, India knows how to do food, with every region offering its own unique flavours.

Among the real standouts, though, is the southeastern state of Kerala, where coconut

curries, sweet chutneys and fresh seafood dishes are served alongside its idyllic backwaters.

It's the spice plantations for which the region is best known, however, and tours such as Cox & Kings' Spice Lands of Kerala take guests out to see them. Travelsphere's Kerala – Flavours of Southern India adds various other culinary experiences, including a cookery demonstration by a local chef.

Book it: Travelsphere's 10-day Kerala – Flavours of Southern India itinerary costs from £1,599 including all flights, half-board



ABOVE: Japanese sushi



RIGHT: A hawker stall in Singapore

accommodation, overseas transfers, a Travelsphere tour manager and local guides. travelsphere.co.uk

▶ CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

No list would be complete without Thailand, where chunky pad thais, sweet-spicy curries and fresh, bursting spring rolls bring food lovers flocking.

Among its key spots is northern city Chiang Mai, where the cuisine takes inspiration from Myanmar, Laos and China; think mild spices, jackfruit dishes and local specialities such as gaeng hang lay – a Burmese-style curry made with tamarind, pork and shrimp.

The real draw, though, is the array of cooking classes on offer, providing visitors with the chance to see how these dishes are put together – and you the opportunity to bag some extra commission.

Book it: Gold Medal can add a half-day cookery lesson, costing from £26, to a twin-centre pairing Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

goldmedal.com

▶ HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM

Be it a baguette-style banh mi or a bowl of steaming pho, Vietnam has firmly established itself as

a foodie haven thanks to its French-meets-Asian influences and focus on local ingredients.

Capital city Hanoi has plenty to offer, with street-side joints lining heaving alleys. But for the ultimate adventure, look no further than Ho Chi Minh City, which is home to a plethora of street eats as well as high-end spots such as Vietnam House, a fine-dining restaurant owned by celebrity chef and APT ambassador Luke Nguyen.

Clients on APT's Luke Nguyen's Vietnam and Mekong River Cruise visit the restaurant as part of their trip – while spending two days with the chef, visiting people's homes and taking part in a cooking class – before boarding the ship for a cruise to Siem Reap.

Wendy Wu Tours, meanwhile, offers a culinary-focused adventure through the country on its Vietnam and Cambodia Discovery trip, taking clients to villages and family homes, and adding a Vespa tour that takes in Ho Chi Minh City's key food spots.

Book it: APT's 16-day Luke Nguyen's Vietnam and Mekong River Cruise costs from £6,490 per person, based on twin-share accommodation, departing November 29.

aptouring.co.uk

Best of the rest

Macao: Named a Unesco 'Creative City of Gastronomy' for 2018, Macao is fast becoming the next big thing, with Portuguese-inspired specialities meeting traditional Chinese dishes, and a swathe of restaurants recently opening in foodie haven Taipa Village.

Penang, Malaysia: Hawker stalls are the key draw here, with Chinese and Malay fusions found across the city, alongside traditional dishes such as Penang assam laksa – mackerel, tamarind and chilli blended into a noodle soup.

Siem Reap, Cambodia: Fish curries with coconut give Khmer cuisine appeal, and one of the best places to sample it is Siem Reap, where you'll find 'Road 60' – a long street lined with food vendors, picnickers and a fun fair, which InsideAsia visits on its 11-day Culinary Cambodia trip.



LEFT: Celebrity chef Luke Nguyen

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