

A new light

Chinese New Year is a great time to experience Asia at its most colourful, writes Laura French

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Chinese New Year, Spring Festival, the Lunar New Year – whatever you call it, this 15-day period sees China burst into colour with parades, dragon dances, lantern festivals and firework displays.

Taking place in February or March each year, with the next New Year's Day falling on February 5, 2019, it's a time when bright red lanterns line the streets and indulgent feasts fill the tables. For local people, it's largely focused on the home, but visitors will find a host of street celebrations across cities in China. Here are some of the best places for clients who want to experience it in all its colourful, chaotic glory.

► HONG KONG

Nowhere does Chinese quite like Hong Kong, whose multi-day fiesta is one of the best extravaganzas in the world.

Celebrations kick off over New Year's Day with a night-time parade featuring huge, glittering floats and dancing troupes bopping along to live music from around the world. They continue over the next week and beyond, with a fireworks display over Victoria Harbour (pictured) on the second day, a horse racing event on the third day, and a string of other festivities that range from flower markets to foodie events.

Look out for special treats, such as sweet dumplings,

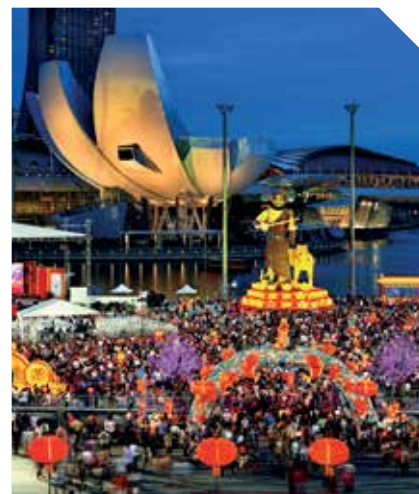


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turnip cake and other dim sum delicacies. Book it: Premier Holidays can offer four nights over Chinese New Year from £849 per person, based on two sharing a room at The Cityview, with flights from Heathrow on February 3, 2019. premierholidays.co.uk

► SHANGHAI

For those wanting to experience new year at its most traditional, look to Shanghai. Elaborate temple celebrations, historic fairs and dragon dances are among the highlights. Don't miss the evening ceremony at Longhua Temple on New Year's Eve, which sees 108 Buddhist monks climb the pagoda to strike the bell of the city's oldest temple, or the Yu Garden lantern festival, where more than a million creations, from enormous animals to luminescent monuments, come together in a rainbow of colour. Beyond the city itself, Shanghai Disney Resort goes all out with musical performances, Mickey-shaped lanterns and



PICTURES: ANDREW TAN; SHUTTERSTOCK

LEFT: Shanghai

ABOVE:
Singapore's River
Hongbao festival



Be flexible

Chinese New Year is a busy time for travelling – suggest heading out a few days early to avoid peak start and end dates.

Expect crowds

Warn clients it will be very crowded, with some restaurants and shops closed during the holiday period.

Book early

Advise booking transport, accommodation and restaurants as early as possible to secure availability.

➔ character parades, while the nearby 'water towns' of Hangzhou, Suzhou and Zhujiajiao offer a more tranquil take on the celebrations.

Book it: Links Travel & Tours can tailor a six-day package that visits Shanghai, Zhujiajiao and Hangzhou, starting at £1,245 per person, based on twin-share four-star B&B accommodation. linkstravelandtours.co.uk

TAIWAN

Just as lively when the clock strikes 12 is Taiwan, where booming firecrackers light up the sky – originally believed to ward off a legendary monster – and families gather to exchange red envelopes symbolising good fortune, while feasting on traditional dishes.

The annual highlight is the Taiwan Lantern Festival, a multi-day, carnival-style fiesta that takes place in different areas each year, with music, folk performances and a whole lot of colour. Next year, it's in the county of Pingtung, from February 19 to March 3.

Elsewhere, there's the annual two-day Yanshui Beehive Fireworks Festival in Tainan, where it's considered lucky to be hit by fireworks, and the Pingxi Sky Lantern Festival in Taipei, where thousands of lanterns are released into the sky in a dazzling display.

Book it: Regent Holidays offers a 12-day Taiwan by Train & Kinmen Island tour from £2,265 per person, visiting Taipei, Pingxi, Kaohsiung and more by rail. regent-holidays.co.uk

SINGAPORE

Singapore knows how to put on a party and its Lunar New Year celebrations are no exception. At the heart of it all is the Chingay Parade: an all-singing, all-dancing convoy of floats, acrobats, drummers, stilt-walkers and other performers that takes place in Chinatown on the first weekend of the new year and lays claim to being the biggest float parade in Asia – think Singapore's answer to Mardi Gras or Rio Carnival.

Elsewhere, a lighting-up ceremony kicks off the whole shebang with fireworks, lion dances and more illuminating Chinatown Street, while

Marina Bay's floating platform comes alive with the River Hongbao festival: a collection of performances, food, games and rides spread over a week.

For those wanting to make the most of the festivities, suggest staying at the Furama RiverFront Singapore, where specially themed menus and activities, such as balloon-sculpting and zodiac-reading, are on hand.

Book it: Five nights in a deluxe room at the four-star Furama RiverFront costs from £739 per person (room-only) with Gold Medal, including Turkish Airlines flights from Gatwick on February 4, 2019. goldmedal.co.uk

Best of the rest

2019 FESTIVALS

SONGKRAN, THAILAND April 13 to 15

For Thailand's new year, locals take to the streets wielding water pistols, buckets and sponges. Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket and the islands are all hotspots for the celebrations.

TET, VIETNAM February 5

Fireworks, flower festivals, folk music and food make up Vietnam's Lunar new

year celebrations in February, with the biggest events centred around Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

COCHIN CARNIVAL, INDIA December 25 to January 1

Held in the last week of December, this colourful spectacle sees the town of Cochin in Kerala filled with lights, street parties, sports races and performances, culminating in a huge procession on New Year's Day.