

ASK THE operator

Customers interested in Asia but apprehensive about booking?
Laura French seeks experts' recommendations for this year and next



PICTURES: Shutterstock; A Tyler Photography

1 VIETNAM

WHAT'S THE BRIEF?

A couple are looking for a culture-filled trip away from the crowds, offering local explorations as well as beach-time. They might be concerned about the current situation and want somewhere that's relatively easy to get to with direct flights, but where they won't have to worry about getting visas sorted weeks in advance.



Kerry Golds
managing director, Abercrombie & Kent
and Cox & Kings

WE SUGGEST

Vietnam has done a good job of containing Covid-19, with restaurants, tourist sites and hotels having started to reopen back in May.

For clients concerned about travelling through airports, there's a fast-track service available on arrival at Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to speed up the visa process, and UK citizens can now apply for a \$25 e-visa, processed in three working days, making it a wise choice for late availability.

In terms of where to go, we'd recommend a cruise around Lan Ha Bay. It has a similar landscape to Halong Bay with towering karsts and secluded beaches, but it gets far fewer visitors than its neighbour. Exploring the Mekong Delta by boat is also a must, as is a visit to the ancient town of Hoi An – recommend the beachfront Boutique Hoi An Resort for a peaceful couples' retreat.

December to March is the best time to visit, with clear skies and sunshine in the south and cooler temperatures in the north (14-20C), without the heat of the summer monsoon season.

Book it: Cox & Kings has a 14-day Spirit of Vietnam tour departing January and February 2021 from £2,495, including accommodation, some meals and flights.
coxandkings.co.uk

2 THAILAND

WHAT'S THE BRIEF?

A family is seeking a winter-sun trip where they can combine island-hopping with nature and wildlife experiences, but they're apprehensive about booking. They want direct flights and value for money, with the option of villa accommodation in quiet, secluded areas where they won't encounter too many others.



John Parker
product manager, Premier Holidays

WE SUGGEST

Thailand has seen low infection numbers and was the first country to implement a post-Covid health and safety certification scheme (SHA), which all hotels, restaurants and shops must adhere to before they can open.

For those looking for a holiday away from the hotspots, we'd recommend islands such as Koh Tao, Koh Lanta, Koh Samet or Koh Chang. The latter two have the added appeal of being accessible from Bangkok by road and boat rather than a domestic flight.

If it's a family after something a little different, suggest Elephant Hills Luxury Tented Camp in Khao Sok National Park, which offers elephant experiences and other activities with eco-friendly, luxury tented accommodation.

For added peace of mind, our flexible booking policy allows customers to change their trip to a new date within the next 11 months, any time up to 11 weeks before departure.

Book it: A 12-night trip, including two nights' full-board at Elephant Hills, four nights in Phuket and six nights in Khao Lak, in June 2021, costs from £1,299, including flights.
premierholidays.co.uk

3 SOUTH KOREA

WHAT'S THE BRIEF?

Clients are looking for an off-the-beaten-track adventure where they can meet local people, sample traditional food and experience a new culture. They might have already travelled to the more popular parts of Asia and now want something a little different, with options for hiking and other activities as well as sightseeing.



Chris Greener
southeast Asia & China regional product
manager, InsideAsia Tours

WE SUGGEST

InsideAsia was due to officially launch South Korea as a new destination this year, as we'd noticed more people were asking about it. South Korea is a less-visited option for clients after an alternative to Japan. With its excellent food, mountainous landscapes and vibrant cities, it provides a similar cultural experience but boasts its own distinct identity.

The buzz of super-modern Seoul is amazing, and you can't go wrong with a food tour of the city to try the likes of *bibimbap* and *kimchi*, or a visit to a *pocha* (traditional bar) for a glimpse of local life. Gyeongju is the country's history capital, with temples, pagodas, tombs and ruins, while Jeonju is renowned for Hanok Village, where guests can stay in a traditional Korean guesthouse. There's also plenty of hiking, with 70% of the country covered in mountains.

In terms of who to sell to, South Korea suits someone prepared to step outside their comfort zone and try new things. I believe its strong anti-Covid response bodes well for future interest.

Book it: InsideAsia offers tailor-made trips to South Korea and will be launching an official programme in 2021.
insideasiatours.com