



Lifestyle / Travel & Leisure

# Remote Asia: three wilderness destinations that offer mountains, islands, or steppe for solitude and reflection when flights resume


Your jaw will drop as you journey through Bhutan's Himalayan landscapes to a hidden paradise; the views are just as epic in Mongolia, where you can milk horses. To reach Myanmar's Mergui Archipelago takes two flights and three-and-a-half hours by boat. Jungle, clear water, wildlife and eco-resorts await you

**Topic | Asia travel**



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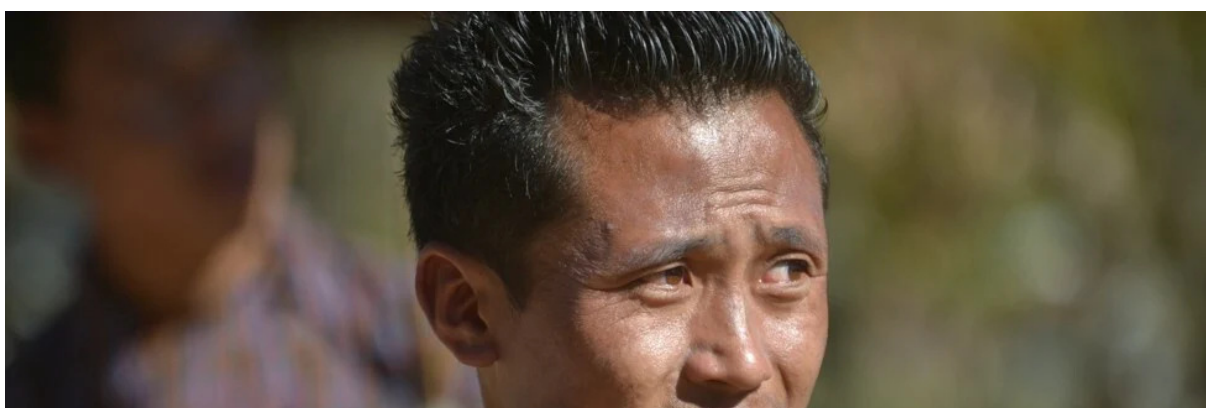


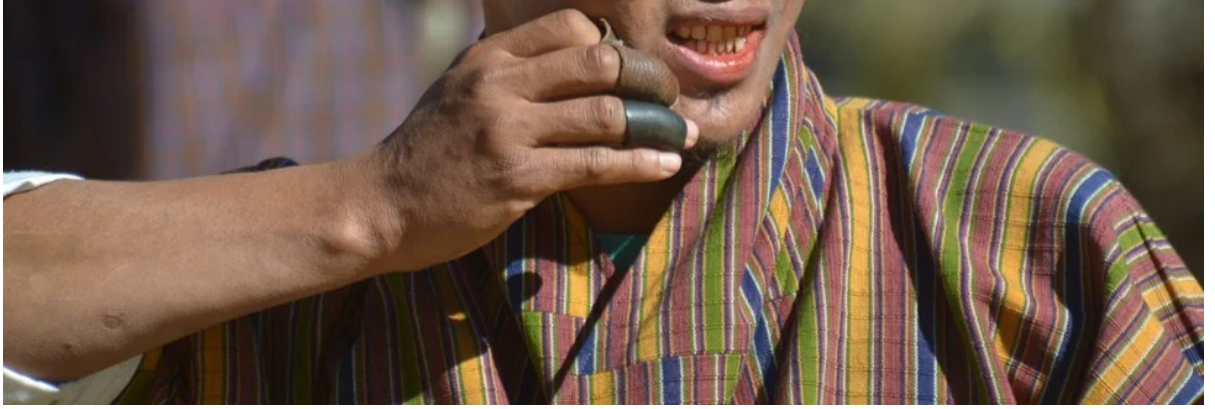
As we look ahead to when some sense of normality returns, many of us dream of heading to culturally rich, beautiful and inspiring destinations that lift the soul.

While some might look forward to being swept up in a mass of humanity, revelling in contact and the energy of the crowd, I hope my first trip will allow for reflection, quiet solitude and an appreciation that things have moved on. Here are three Asian wilderness destinations to offer a truly off-grid experience, and the opportunity to ground oneself.

## **Land of the Thunder Dragon: Bhutan**

The first already has a reputation as one of the most [Zen destinations](#) on the planet: Bhutan. Once you land in the Himalayan kingdom known as “the land of the thunder dragon” – and there are only eight pilots registered to touch down at tiny Paro airport – you begin to understand why. Passport control is decorated with elegant hand-painted wooden carvings more befitting a temple.





An archer watching his arrow fly in Bhutan. Photo: Chris Dwyer

The country is famed for its “Gross National Happiness” index, a development philosophy which measures the population’s well-being, happiness and prosperity, instead of gross domestic product. The five-hour drive to our wilderness destination, the Punakha Valley, only confirms this unique approach to life.

Stopping off for coffee in Thimphu, the country’s capital, you may note the lack of any traffic lights, and you cannot help but be charmed by the famous dancing traffic policeman, dressed in an elegant navy coat.



The famous dancing policeman of Thimphu, Bhutan. Photo: Chris Dwyer



Thimphu feels like Manhattan compared to the wilderness of the Punakha Valley. The entire journey there is mesmerising thanks to the diversity of landscapes, and vistas that take in distant snow-capped Himalayan peaks, plunging ravines and wooded valleys that feel more Alpine than Asian. The views from resorts such as Gangtey Lodge allow you to experience all three, in addition to an explosion of colour when rhododendrons bloom throughout the valley in spring.

For those with deep pockets, the [Como Uma Punakha](#) offers a “scenic heli-adventure” – an all-inclusive six-night trip that includes a flight up to The Laya Valley, known as a hidden paradise.

It takes five days’ walk – each way – to get there, meaning you are almost guaranteed to be the only visitors to marvel at the jaw-dropping vastness of the landscape, the prayer flags fluttering in the wind, and the local people leading lives that are a million miles away from those of metropolitan Asia.



The famous Tiger's Nest monastery, or Paro Taktsang, in Bhutan at sunset. Photo: Getty Images

**Getting there:** there are direct flights from Bangkok to Bhutan. Druk Air is the country's national airline. The Punakha valley is then a five-hour drive from Paro International Airport.

**Staying there:** Gangtey Lodge ([gangteylodge.com](http://gangteylodge.com)) has suites from US\$550, Como Uma Punakha ([comohotels.com](http://comohotels.com)) from US\$460. More budget-friendly options include Zhingkham Resort ([visitbhutan.com](http://visitbhutan.com)) from US\$80.

# Epic, empty vistas: Mongolia

Barely a four-hour direct flight from Hong Kong and a couple of hours' drive takes you to the unimaginably empty plains of Mongolia. This is wilderness on an epic, cinematic scale: consider that in Hong Kong there are 17,311 people per square mile. In Mongolia? Five.

As the world's 18th largest country, its landscapes are remarkably diverse, ranging from rolling, grass-covered hills to plains covered in wildflowers, dark blue lakes, and forests that stretch as far as the eye can see. You'll likely pass herds of wild horses or see eagles swooping but, other than the wind, it is the deafening silence that strikes you.



A herdsman with his flock, Mongolia. Photo: Chris Dwyer

Hong Kong-based Charlotte Travel offers six-night packages to Mongolia that include visits to national parks, monasteries, camel riding and trips to the capital, Ulan Bator. Once outside the city, bricks-and-mortar hotels are almost non-existent, but there are comfortable, if not luxurious, “tourist camps” featuring traditional ger tents with communal facilities.

For those with bigger budgets, a British company called Mandala Mongolia offers two private ger options, wilderness or nomadic.



Their luxury handmade gers come complete with four-poster bed, dining table, separate hot shower and bathroom. Wine and cocktails are served before a gourmet dinner – your chef and host are part of the team, and drive ahead of you to set up the ger for you. Choose some records to play on their turntable, sip a digestif and step outside to be knocked sideways by the stars above.

Another option is to have your accommodation set up 100 metres from a nomadic Mongolian family staying in their own tent. You can help them milk their herds, join them for home-made cheese (admittedly an acquired taste) or share mare's milk tea, along with a pinch of snuff.

**Getting there:** MIAT Mongolian Airlines fly direct from Hong Kong to Ulan Bator in around four hours. Travellers can also connect via Beijing, from where MIAT flies to Ulan Bator.

**Staying there:** Hong Kong-based Charlotte Travel ([charlottetravel.com.hk](http://charlottetravel.com.hk)) offers a six-night trip to Mongolia from HK\$11,000 per person. Mandala Mongolia ([mandalamongolia.com](http://mandalamongolia.com)) nightly rates start from US\$1,600 for two, all inclusive.



A beach in Myanmar's unspoilt Mergui Archipelago. Photo: Shutterstock

## **Deserted islands: Myanmar's Mergui Archipelago**

There's no hiding the fact that it's an effort to get to the Mergui Archipelago off the west coast of Myanmar. You fly through Bangkok to Ranong in southern Thailand, then jump on a long-tail boat that splutters gently to Kawthaung, the southernmost tip of Myanmar, from where it's a two-hour ride aboard a speedboat.

The experience is a reminder that there are some parts of the continent still largely untouched and, thankfully, underdeveloped. There are only a handful of resorts, all well away from one another, but two stand out for their sustainable approach.



Sunset at Wa Ale, Myanmar. Photo: Chris Dwyer

Wa Ale sits on its own island within a marine national park in impossibly clear azure water that teems with sea life. Monkeys keep a watchful eye from nearby rocks as you reach the wooden walkway that winds through mangroves and takes you to the resort's heart, The Pavilion.

It quickly becomes home from home – at least when you can pull yourself away from your private beachside villa. Not a single tree was felled during construction, and the resort's Lampi Foundation supports the local village school and clinic as well as multiple conservation projects.

The Pavilion is where chef Aung Soe cooks using local produce to brilliant effect, be it in real-deal Neapolitan pizzas or barracuda curry, breakfast spreads that cry out to be posted on Instagram, or friendly, wine-fuelled communal dinners.



Boulder Bay, Myanmar. Photo: Chris Dwyer

Boulder Bay is another option, on one of the archipelago's most western islands, known for its clear water, valleys and cliffs. Twenty bungalows built from renewable materials blend seamlessly into the environment and surrounding jungle.

While relaxing is a critical component of any holiday, you will also want to make the most of the island's biodiversity, which includes dozens of bird species, among them the white-bellied sea eagle and brahminy kite. When you hit the waves, you can see manta rays, blacktip sharks, whale sharks and extraordinary coral life, as well as technicolour species of fish.

It is there, in the warm embrace of the water, a true aquatic wilderness, that your post-coronavirus sense of peace and place may well be found.

**Getting there:** Nok Air and Air Asia fly from Bangkok to Ranong. From there it's an approximately 3½-hour journey to the Mergui Archipelago.

**Staying there:** Wa Ale resort rates start from US\$425 per person per night, full board and inclusive of boat transfers and activities. Boulder Bay rates start from US\$150 per person per night, full board without alcohol.

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