

SPECIAL: BUSINESS TRAVELERS VOTE—TOP HOTELS, AIRLINES, AIRPORTS

# Condé Nast Traveler

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

OCTOBER 2007

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A TRIP  
TO  
THAILAND**  
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## 33 TROPICAL ESCAPES

GLORIOUS BEACHES, GREAT HOTELS  
(A 12-COUNTRY GUIDE)

ASIA ISSUE

**NEXT GREAT  
PLACES**

**20** UNDISCOVERED  
GEMS

PLUS

**ROCK-BOTTOM  
AIRFARES**  
HOW TO FLY LONG-  
DISTANCE FOR LESS

**HAWAII**  
HIDDEN HONOLULU

**SINGAPORE**  
WHERE TO STAY, EAT, SHOP

**CHINA'S**  
ANCIENT SPLENDOR



# THE GREAT ASIAN BEACH FINDER

THE WORLD'S LARGEST LANDMASS HAS ITS SHARE OF LEGENDARY SHORES. CYNTHIA ROSENFELD TRAVELS TO 12 COUNTRIES TO SUSS OUT 33 STRANDS TAILORED TO EVERY TASTE AND BUDGET—ALONG WITH WHERE TO EAT, SLEEP, PARTY, PLAY, AND BE PAMPERED

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
HÅKAN LUDWIGSON

Land ho! Each of the six villas at Dhoni Mig-hili, a two-and-a-half-acre resort island in the Maldives' North Ari Atoll, comes with a 65-foot sailboat modeled on the wooden dhonis used by the ancient Phoenicians.

## 33 BEST BEACHES

### OVERALL

INDIA: Beach No. 7, Havelock Island  
INDONESIA: Nihiwatu Beach, Sumba Island  
MALDIVES: Baa, North Ari, and North Malé atolls  
PHILIPPINES: Palawan Province  
THAILAND: Koh Phi Phi

### BEACH HOTELS

CAMBODIA: Knai Bang Chatt, Kep  
MALDIVES: Huvafen Fushi, North Malé Atoll  
PHILIPPINES: Amanpulo, Pamalican Island  
THAILAND: Amanpuri, Phuket  
VIETNAM: Nam Hai, China Beach

### BEACH PARTIES

INDONESIA: Ku De Ta, Bali  
SINGAPORE: Sentosa Island  
SRI LANKA: Wijaya Beach  
THAILAND: Amanpuri, Phuket; Full Moon Party, Koh Phangan

### BEACH SCENERY

CHINA: The Great Wall, Lao Long Tou  
INDONESIA: Komodo dragons, Komodo National Park; Tanah Lot Temple, Bali  
JAPAN: Hot-sand baths, Kyushu Island  
SRI LANKA: Stilt fishermen, Weligama

### BEACH SPAS

INDONESIA: Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay  
MALAYSIA: Four Seasons Resort, Langkawi  
MALDIVES: Huvafen Fushi, North Malé Atoll  
THAILAND: Kamalaya, Koh Samui; The Sarojin, Khao Lak

### BEACH SPORTS

INDONESIA: Diving, Banda Sea; surfing, Sumba Island  
MALDIVES: Sailing, North Ari Atoll; surfing, North Malé Atoll  
PHILIPPINES: Diving, Bacuit Bay

els in sand up to their necks. Don't save the roughly five-dollar fee by attempting to dig yourself a hole: Temperatures vary dramatically, and amateurs risk digging their own graves. Daily repetition of this ritual is believed to purify the blood as the body sweats out toxins, but locals swear these body burials also refresh the soul. The best time to experience this otherworldly scene of steam swirling around heads poking out of the shimmering ebony landscape is late afternoon, when the sun streaks pink and yellow behind the nearby volcanic island of Sakurajima. Overnight at the **Ibusuku Hakuuikan** ryokan, where then prime minister Junichiro Koizumi, seeking to clear political bad blood, hosted his South Korean counterpart in 2004 (81-993-22-3131; hakuuikan.co.jp/en; doubles, \$127-\$300).

## < Best Beach Spas >

### INDONESIA

#### Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay

"You are intensely present," said Dutch masseuse Elisa Senese after an hour of administering water therapy in the **Four Seasons Resort Bali's** oceanfront pool, which overlooks a four-mile caramel crescent on the southern coast. What would be a compliment back at the office here was a mild rebuke, as the *watsu*-trained healer encouraged me to let go of the stress inherent in a transcontinental life. I heard Jimbaran Bay's gentle churn when my ears broke the surface as Senese took me through underwater spinestretches that painlessly released tension. More aquatic pleasures, from private sea-facing plunge pools to outdoor showers and soaking tubs, awaited back at the 147 thatched-roof villas sprinkled along the southern slope of Jimbaran Bay, all with sea views, Balinese textiles, and generous daybeds (62-361-701-010; fourseasons.com; doubles, \$630-\$2,700; one-hour water massage, \$110).

### MALAYSIA

#### Four Seasons Resort, Langkawi

The choice between the amenities of a full-service spa and the convenience of an in-room treatment is rendered moot at the **Four Seasons Resort's** 2,369-square-foot beach villas, all 20 of which front the Andaman Sea. As I plunged into my private pool, the masseuse readied the massage room. Moving from bottom to top, this Balinese master worked her strong hands into my feet to unlock travel tensions at the root. Like all therapists here, she is trained in Reiki, which allows her to channel balanc-

ing energy I could actually feel as she tenderly cradled my head or placed both palms between my breastbone and stomach to calm my core. At this 91-room resort, by far Langkawi's finest accommodations, even the standard guest pavilions have been designed for indulgence by top Thai architect Lek Bunnag, who nestled the spa's six treatment spaces around dramatic granite cliffs (60-4-950-8888; fourseasons.com; doubles, \$495-\$540; beach villas, \$1,500; massages, \$96-\$182).

### THAILAND

#### Kamalaya, Koh Samui

At this open-air pavilion built into the rocky cliffs above Koh Samui's Laem Set Beach, eight simple mattresses clad in high-thread-count cotton are strategically angled to soak up glistening Gulf of Thailand views. Each time **Kamalaya's** Thai masseuse wrapped her deceptively svelte arms around mine to bend my coach-class-ravaged back into the contortion known as cobra, my eyes feasted on the azure expanse as if imbibing a curative tonic. Afterward, I floated back to one of 60 guest rooms set amid the towering coconut palms and filled with Himalayan treasures by the art-dealer owner. Thanks to American architect Robert Powell's deliberate design, I never lost sight of the sea, except when climbing back up the hillside for another treatment at the ten-room Wellness Sanctuary, which administers everything from flower remedies

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to a full Western medical checkup (66-77-429-800; kamalaya.com; doubles, \$217–\$345; Thai massage, \$53–\$73).

### The Sarojin, Khao Lak

Few experiences can top a sunset walk along Khao Lak Beach's nearly seven miles of latte-colored sand; among them is the Pathways spa's Faa Fairt massage, still a favorite of mine after two years and dozens of exotic treatments around the globe. I practically skipped across the elevated wooden walkway that snakes through this 56-room resort. **The Sarojin**—which has minimalist yet entirely comfortable accommodations and gourmet French and Thai cuisine—has led local efforts to put Khao Lak back on the holiday map (it was one of the beach communities hardest hit by the 2004 tsunami). While a great rub needs no special ambience, a sublime location can significantly enhance the experience. These four open-air suites set along a natural klong, or canal, are protected from the Andaman Sea by high dunes yet are close enough that you can hear the waves washing over the coral. For 90 minutes, I enjoyed the indulgence of two women stroking my naked limbs with Swiss synchronicity (66-

76-427-900; sarojin.com; doubles, \$365–\$541; Faa Fairt massage, \$150).

## < Best Beaches for Sports >

### INDONESIA

#### Diving, Banda Sea

What nineteenth-century British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace observed in the biodiverse waters off present-day Indonesia prompted peer Charles Darwin to publish his theory of evolution. Darwin may have stolen history's spotlight, but serious divers seek out the Wallace Line (an ecotone in the waters between Bali and Lombok) and the Makassar Strait, where two distinct Asian and Australasian ecosystems overlap. Former Ambon Island dive-shop owner Jason Friedman suggested I submerge myself in the Banda Sea, since fish migrate down the Marianas Trench seeking food along these rich coral reefs. "It's a marine superhighway," he told me by e-mail from his current post as manager of the Four Seasons' elephant camp in Thailand's Golden Triangle. There's even a beach bonus: Parrot fish and other reef-eating marine life digest the coral and then flush out the powdery white granules that I found along Friedman's favorite Asian beaches—those that ring the Tanimbar Islands, between Timor and New Guinea. Dive the Banda Sea in style aboard the **Silolona**, a thoroughly luxurious five-suite interpretation of the indigenous ships that have transported rice and spices through the surrounding waters for centuries (62-361-287-326; silolona.com; from \$12,000 per day).

#### Surfing, Sumba Island

Lethal for beginners, the left-breaking waves off the ten-bungalow eco-retreat **Nihiwatu** (see "Best Beaches Overall") are legendary for serious surfers, who arrive by air from Bali with three boards in tow. "It's a drag not to have a fourth," former pro surfer Jeff Novak lamented as our Trigana Air flight from Bali bounced through the clouds (Bali's Denpasar airport levies considerable fees for travelers with more than three boards, to discourage illegal imports). Novak was surfing well-known Bali swells Dreamland and Uluwatu when surfer Web sites like wetsand.com lured him to Sumba's less-crowded waters. Only nine surfers at a time are allowed at Nihiwatu, which keeps the island's southwest coast clear for wave warriors like those I heard praising "the fastest curls short of the Pipeline," referring to Oahu's iconic break (62-361-757-149; nihiwatu.com; doubles, \$390, all-inclusive).

### MALDIVES

#### Sailing, North Ari Atoll

"It's all about the dhoni," said my friend Katerina Katopis of her recent visit to **Dhoni Mighili**, a two-acre islet cum resort in the Maldives' North Ari Atoll. The unique selling point of the rustic-chic property, which is limited to 12 adults at a time, is that each of its six modest villas comes with a 65-foot sailboat similar to the wooden dhonis used by the ancient Phoenicians. Handcrafted of balau wood, Dhoni Mighili's interpretations have been updated with cushy comforts like daybeds on deck and Frette sheets in the stateroom down below, not to mention a crew of three. Traveling skippers may miss the hard work of actually keeping the boat afloat, but sybarites like me can sunbathe between scuba dives among the kaleidoscopic coral and soldierfish, turtles, and whale sharks. We disembarked at one postcard-perfect deserted isle after another for fresh-caught picnic lunches of grilled tuna and chili lobster (960-666-0751; dhoni mighili.com; doubles, \$2,200–\$2,600, all-inclusive).

#### Surfing, North Malé Atoll

These Indian Ocean atolls are fast becoming known as some of the world's most indulgent surfing destinations, with high-performance waves and water temperatures of 80 to 86 degrees year-round. Swapping bespoke business suits for neoprene, stressed-out executives catch the curl aboard the 128-foot, triple-deck **Four Seasons Explorer**. Australia's Tropicsurf operates surf clinics for all levels aboard the luxury catamaran, which accommodates up to 22 guests but recommends that novices complete a beginner's course at the Four Seasons Kuda Hura, in the North Malé Atoll. For three days (four- and seven-day cruises are also options), we sailed, as promised, between "secluded locations no other surfers know about, where guests can live out their surfing fantasies." Then came my favorite part: a pampering welcome back from the Kuda Hura's smiling staff, arms outstretched to wrap us in bathrobes seemingly sewn of cloud fluff (960-664-4888; fourseasons.com; one night, \$679–\$784 per person).

### PHILIPPINES

#### Diving, Bacuit Bay

Spend time between the sheets at El Nido Resorts' **Miniloc Island Resort** or **Lagen Island Resort** (see "Best Beaches Overall"), then hit the water, where prehistoric limestone rocks jut through green-tinged Bacuit Bay. The ancient monoliths here recall Phuket's Phang Na and Vietnam's Halong Bay, and gentle currents allow div-