

5 Unique Travel Destinations In Asia To Experience The Native Way Of Life



Join in!

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The local way

It is exciting to get off the beaten track, whether by vehicle or trekking and visit places few have seen. Being a writer and photographer, I like to record what I see, particularly the native people.

Many of these cultures may disappear or rely on tourism to keep alive. There are a number of places to interact in South East Asia. Some require a bit of effort to get to - but it's more than worth it.

1. Philippines - Luzon



The Ifugao mountain people are rice cultivators and live in Northern Luzon, a ten hour air-conditioned, express bus ride from Manila. They can be seen on a daily basis going about their work in the famous 2000 year old UNESCO rice terraces of Banaue. Every April, they assemble for traditional games at the Imbayah Festival to celebrate abundance and good harvest. The Ifugao don full ethnic costumes and participate in competitive sporting events and cultural activities.

After a ritual opening and street parade, expect fierce games of tug of war, arm wrestling and leg wrestling by contestants of various ages. Top spinning, races on stilts and ball games were all included when I attended. Rice pounding, weaving and carving were also performed competitively demanding speed and skill.



The undisputed highlight of the festival, however, was the wooden scooter race from Banaue Point downhill for 4 km to the town Plaza. It was chaotic but great fun.



2. Southern Laos

There are many tribal villages in Southern Laos and most welcome visitors. On our route from Pakse to Attapeu, we stopped at Ban Kandone, home to the Katu tribe who are animists and sacrifice buffalo at auspicious dates.

Women wove cloth to sell for income and everybody smoked water pipes. Mr Wipad, the village chief, pointed to a wooden coffin stored below a house built on stilts and commented "We Katu like to prepare for death by designing our own coffins and store them until needed".

We met the cheerful widow Soon and her relatives in Vongvilay village near Attapeu.





"I sold my large ivory earrings to the tribal traders" she explained pragmatically. "It seemed a lot of money at the time. My husband, who was a good hunter, had passed away and it was difficult to earn a living growing rice, corn and manioc."

At 75 years old, she was the oldest of the Brau women in the village. Her ivory earrings had been replaced by large bamboo studs, worn in the earlobes which had been stretched for more than 60 years. At puberty, her adult teeth had been filed flat with a knife. When she got married, her face was painfully tattooed using ink from the crushed bark of a local tree.

"This lifestyle will disappear as our children do not want their ears stretched or facial tattoos. It is better that they get educated and find jobs in the city," she concluded.

3. Northern Thailand - Chiang Mai and the Golden Triangle

The Golden Triangle area near Chang Rai in Northern Thailand gives an opportunity to explore tribal villages. With sensitivity and a local speaking guide it is possible to have an interesting, unobtrusive and educational visit. Obviously the more remote the village the more authentic the experience you are likely to have.

Alternatively Baan Tong Luang near Chiang Mai is a very unique place as there is a cluster of seven different small tribal villages you can visit in one trip including the famous long neck women, Akha, Palong and Yao tribes.



The nearby Hmong village of Pha Nok Kok has an interesting museum with an old spinning loom, a stand on clothes iron, a relaxed atmosphere and hardly any visitors.

4. Vietnam - Sapa

Sapa in Vietnam is located in a beautiful valley, surrounded by mountains. It is home to eight hill tribes which can easily be differentiated by their clothing. To get there, travel from Hanoi by overnight train or by bus. You will see the ethnic people in their traditional costumes all around the city, particularly in the town square and market and in surrounding villages. Some can be quite persistent and expect you to buy a small article from them if they pose for photos.

The Red Dzao women wear a distinctive red hat and shave their eyebrows. They cultivate vegetables in the highlands and are skilled embroiders.



The Black Hmong are frequently seen at markets in the region in their black outfits and at Cat Cat, a large village easily accessed by motorbike.

Sapa is a great place to hike but take note, some of the routes are steep and quite demanding. If you do a full trek the Zay tribe families often open up their homes for a small fee and such a stay can be very rewarding.

5. Indonesia – Lake Toba

The ideal way to tour Lake Toba, home to the Batak people, is to fly to Medan and book a private tour with a car and driver but it's also easy to backpack. From Parapat take the ferry to Samosir, an island in Lake Toba about the size of Singapore.



Travelling around Samosir it is obvious that ancestor worship is very important to the Bataks. Many graves are bigger than houses and placed in the grounds of the family home.

Go to Simanindo for the Batak cultural performance! The traditional houses there are some of the best on Samosir Island. The outdoor show is very entertaining, there are few tourists and excellent photo opportunities. A small museum includes a royal boat.

Before heading back to Medan visit the Batak Museum in Balige set in beautiful grounds overlooking Lake Toba.

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