

Spiritual *Enlightenment*

*Audley's
Southeast Asia
specialists profile
the magnificent
religious sites
of the region*



BOROBUDUR, JAVA

Borobudur is Indonesia's striking Buddhist monument located outside of the beautiful town of Yogyakarta in central Java. Built in the 8th and 9th centuries and taking 75 years to complete, the beauty of Borobudur is not only in its size but also its decoration. It has five kilometres of stunning reliefs along enclosed galleries which represent the transition from reality, through 10 physiological states, to the ultimate condition of spiritual enlightenment – nirvana. My enduring memory of Borobudur was emerging from the corridors of reliefs and seeing the undecorated circular terraces consisting of bell shaped stupas with Buddha's hidden within them.

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CAO DAI GREAT TEMPLE, VIETNAM

The town of Tay Ninh to the north of Saigon houses the headquarters of one of Vietnam's most fascinating indigenous religions – Caodaism. Officially founded in 1926, it is fundamentally a hybrid religion fusing secular and religious ideology from both the East and West, indeed principles from Buddhism, Christianity and Islam can all be identified within Caodaism. Temples can be found throughout the Mekong Delta and Tay Ninh province but easily the most impressive is the Cao Dai Great Temple near Tay Ninh where ceremonies can be observed four times a day. Visit the temple and witness one of these rituals on a day tour from Saigon perhaps including a visit to the nearby Cu Chi tunnels.

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Cambodia

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SUKHOTHAI, THAILAND

Sukhothai flourished as Thailand's first capital between the mid 13th and the late 14th centuries and is considered to be at the heart of the 'Golden Age' of Thai civilisation. The *meuang kao* (old city), which is set aside from the new town, features around 45 square kilometres of ruins. Countless carved stone Buddhas, delicate lotus-bud spires and calm, reflective lily ponds can be found in the lush parkland. It's a place that exerts a wonderfully calming and relaxing effect. This UNESCO world heritage site has 21 historical sites and an additional 70 sites within a five kilometre radius. Nearby you will find the Sawanwarangyok National Museum; the Ramkhamhaeng National Museum; Si Stachanalai (a 13th century city); and the Chaliang ruins (15th century).

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ANGKOR WAT, CAMBODIA

You know when you have crossed the border into Cambodia. The roads are either very old – or very new – and all around you is the mark of History, with a capital "H". Nowhere is this more so than at Angkor Wat, one of the greatest buildings in the world and silent witness to 10 centuries of Khmer history – from Jayavarman VII to the mining of the moats by Pol Pot. It has outlived both men, and become the symbol of the nation, as well as a draw to visitors from across the globe. Escaping the crowds is the most rewarding way to see it and such a building never betrays a repeat visit. When I was last there a young monk led me through the forest towards the Eastern Gate – effectively a back door to Angkor, and there wasn't anyone else in sight, just me and those impassive faces staring out high above the jungle.

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WAT PHOU, LAOS

Wat Phou temple, situated on the Mekong plain and at the foot of Phu Phasak, a sacred mountain to local people for centuries before the construction of the temple (work started in the 6th century), is one of the most significant temples in Laos. Wat Phou's tumbledown pavilions, fascinating crocodile and elephant stones, and sacred spring give this temple a real air of mysticism and magic. Southern Laos sees fewer travellers than the north and as such a trip down to Pakse to board the Wat Phou rice barge, visit the temple itself and the 4,000 islands, is as good a three days as there is to be had in Southeast Asia.

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BAGAN, MYANMAR

Some 13,000 temples and pagodas once stood amid the dry, central plains of Bagan. Today just over 2,000 remain celebrating a history that dates back to the 11th Century and even earlier. This remarkable landscape along the river Irrawaddy is scattered with ruins of all sizes and styles – from the imposing Ananda Temple (c.1090), King Kyansitha's masterpiece and the crowning achievement of Mon architecture, to the crumbling remains of small, solitary stupas. Either exploring the arid plains on foot or from a hot air balloon, there is nothing quite like seeing the warm orange glow of the morning sun casting its first rays over Gawdawpalin or the infamous Dhammayangyi.

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