

JULY/AUG 2008:

Singapore, Asia's
Switzerland, Wants
To Be Its London

The 7,000-Pound Polo
Mounts of Thailand's
Golden Triangle

Old Lady of the Sea:
The Last of Korea's
Free-Diving Matriarchs

The Cult Hotelier
Who's Building in Beirut,
Come What May

They'd Like to Teach
the World to Laugh:
India's Funny Gurus

CULTURE + TRAVEL

SPECIAL
ASIA
ISSUE



Your Asia: A bespoke travel outfit makes a visit to an orphanage a coveted stop on the mogul's travel itinerary.

BY JOE DOLCE
PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM GOLFER

Remote Lands does not do tours. Or groups. Or Europe, Africa, or even Japan. It's a small, expensive, custom travel company focused only on Asia (excluding Japan because "it's too done"). You'll pay dearly for the company's services—upwards of \$1,500 per person per day, not including private jets or helicopters—but your trip is precisely tailored to your arcane interests, your crazy schedule, even your allergies.

This means that when you go to a well-trod destination like the Great Wall of China, you don't get the standard Great Wall experience, the one where you're bused to gawk at the same section of bricks as the 10,000 tourists who preceded you that morning or the next 10,000 who'll follow you that afternoon. In the Remote Lands version, you'll stay at a private four-room villa (\$16,000 a night) designed by Shigeru Ban an hour outside Beijing. In the evening you'll be chauffeured to a remote area of the Wall, where your private chef will prepare and serve a candlelit dinner. The company will hire a photographer to document your journey or a beautician to accompany you—if, of course, that's what revs your jets. If you're a more adventurous sort, you might want to skip the popular sights altogether and hop a helicopter to a yurt in the Gobi desert, go camel trekking with some nomads in the morning, then cook up a dinner of *momo* dumplings with them that night.

Remote Lands is run out of New York and Bangkok by a trio of Asia-holics and was the brainchild of Catherine Heald, a serial entrepreneur who fell in love with Hong Kong when she lived there for seven years in the 1980s and '90s. Two and a half years ago, she found herself in New York City, happily ensconced in her second marriage and working in an uptown art gallery. It was... OK. She loved art, but she missed the smell, the sounds, the beautiful messiness of Asia. Whenever she could steal a few minutes, she found herself poring over maps of, say, Sri Lanka, checking out new hotels and checking into them in her dreams. Why, she asked herself, like so many others in the throes of midlife, wasn't she channeling her passions into her livelihood?

Armed with a killer Rolodex and the conviction that "the only thing I was really good at was traveling in Asia," Heald hooked up with an old friend, Jay Tindall, who wanted to move back to Bangkok, and with Bruce Lazarus, a former Sotheby's-trained expert in American decorative

arts and a private art consultant and dealer. All agreed that the world was ready for an ultra-high-end service that crafted dream trips to Asia. "I'd used some of our competitors to tailor-make trips, and I knew that they were giving me the same itineraries that other clients got," says Heald. "Their trips were fine, but they weren't personal. They weren't spectacular."

A client's introduction to Remote Lands is like a visit to a new doctor. You're handed an in-depth questionnaire about your likes and dislikes, interests and desires, must-dos and must avoids. Heald or Lazarus then grill you (in a nice way) and do deep research before conjuring your itinerary—Lazarus, for example, will be spending a month in China this summer to meet gallery owners, painters, and other luminaries of the thriving Beijing and Shanghai art scenes for several collectors who will be arriving this autumn.

One client, an amateur musician, wanted to get an inside view of the Indian music scene. Remote Lands arranged a visit to the Ravi Shankar Institute in Delhi, where he performed live with Indian musicians. Two other clients, a racing fanatic couple, wanted to attend the first-ever nighttime Formula One Grand Prix, which takes place in the streets of Singapore this September. Remote Lands snagged a pair of coveted tickets, reserved an impossible-to-get first-class room at the Fullerton Hotel (which had quadrupled its rates) and a few first-class round-trip air tickets, and put together a five-night trip for \$50,000 a person.

"Having their perspective, as opposed to that of a travel agent who relies on things they've read, was invaluable," says Perry Griffith, an Indianapolis-based real estate manager who toured religious and government sites in India with his wife and daughter for two weeks in 2007. Was it worth the money? "Thank God for membership reward points," which paid for their flights, he says. "But yes, their experience pays off."

One of the most impressive things about Heald and Lazarus, besides their desire to wrangle the impossible, is that their definition of luxury goes beyond high-thread-count sheets and Floris soap. They understand that today you have to go further and deeper into a culture to have an authentic experience, and they'll push clients to see things that many travelers manage to miss, or actively avoid. "What we really like is contrast, the high and low," says Lazarus. "We say, 'Sure, stay in the Aman resort, but after that go way out in the wilderness, spend a couple of days sleeping on the floor of a longhouse in Papua New Guinea, where you have to walk a long way to a shared toilet.'"

Remote Lands books about 25 bespoke trips each year and donates 10 percent of its profits to orphanages, NGOs, and foundations, all of which the principals have visited and vetted in person. They also encourage clients to spend at least one day visiting with the kids who are receiving their aid, urging them to teach a class or just to hang out. "At first, people hem and haw: 'I don't know, it sounds depressing,'" says Heald. "But without fail those who do it come back and say thank you, that it was the most uplifting experience of the journey." ■

Remote Lands: remotelands.com.

Remote Lands partners Bruce Lazarus and Catherine Heald (opposite) dream of Asia at the New York Metropolitan Museum's Astor Court, a Chinese scholar's garden.



COMPASS: REMOTE LANDS



Your ger or mine? You too can experience yurt life with a nomadic Mongolian family.

ASIA TRAVEL SECRETS

Remote Lands partners Bruce Lazarus and Catherine Heald recall 10 of their favorite experiences, some of which you can try for yourself.

646/415-8092
remotelands.com

Bangladesh:

ARCHITECTURE TOUR

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, has an amazing confluence of old and new architecture. Accompanied by photography professor Shahidul Alam, we explored this city by bicycle rickshaw, the favored local mode of transport. Highlights included the amazing parliament building, designed by the Philadelphia architect Louis Kahn, and the University of Dhaka, one of the city's many striking British colonial structures. * Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation offers three-hour guided sightseeing tours of Dhaka City from its Tourist Information Centre at the Dhaka Sheraton Hotel.

880-2/811-9192
bangladeshonline.com/
tourism/spots/dhaka.htm

Bhutan:

THE TĀRĀYANA FOUNDATION

We've been lucky enough to get to know the queen of Bhutan, whose pet charity is the Tārāyana Foundation, which brings health care and education to the far reaches of her country. * You can make donations through the website.

tarayanafoundation.org

China:

TEACHING ENGLISH

One of the most beautiful places we've ever been is Ping An, in the heart of the Longsheng rice terraces in southern China. We went on an early-morning hike there through the villages of Yao and Zhuang and ended up in a small provincial elementary school, where we taught English to a group of children who eagerly recited their ABCs, and by the end of the short lesson were able to say, "My name is ..."

ROCK CLIMBING

When people think of Hong Kong, the words "concrete jungle" come to mind, but it's also one of the world's premier destinations for rock

climbing. Our favorite place to climb was the largely uninhabited Tung Lung Island, accessible by public ferry only on weekends. One weekday we hired a private boat to the island when nobody else was there and had one of our best climbing experiences. We ascended various grades of routes, with the sound of the South China Sea below, fresh air in our lungs, and a thought of skyscrapers and neon. * Ferries run on weekends and public holidays to Tung Lung Island from Sai Won Ho and Sam Ka Tsuen typhoon shelters; weekdays you can rent a sampan (flat-bottomed boat) for four people or a speedboat for eight.

SAM KA TSUEN, HONG KONG
852/90-80-37-54
hongkongclimbing.com/guides/tunglung/index.html

India:

GEM PALACE

The Gem Palace, where the Kasliwal family has, since the 1850s, produced exquisite jewelry for luminaries including Earl Mountbatten, Prince Charles, and Princess Diana, is a sight to behold. * Arrange to have eighth-generation jewelry designer

Munnu Kasliwal escort you through the workrooms, and if you'd like he'll follow up with a private consultation and sketch something according to your wishes and tastes. The finished piece will take months or years to make, but it will be one of a kind.

M.I. RD., JAIPUR
91-14/12-37-41-75
gempalacejaipur.com

VICTORIA MEMORIAL HALL

We've had many a lunch in Calcutta with Pronoy Mahtab (the maharajkumar of Burdwan, a.k.a. Danny) and his wife, Pussie. Afterward, we ride horses or play golf or tennis with them at the Tollygunge Club, a 100-acre country club in the center of Calcutta that's also home to rare trees and birds. Sometimes we take a private tour of the back rooms of the Victoria Memorial Hall, filled with the latest acquisitions.

CALCUTTA
victoriameorial-cal.org

Indonesia:

KITE MAKING

One of the princes of Bali is a kite-making fanatic, and we recently spent an afternoon with him and his family building a

massive, traditional kite that we launched from the beach at sunset. Afterward we had a sumptuous Balinese feast in his palace. * In the center of the island, Ubud Hanging Gardens offers traditional kite-making classes for kids. Students learn to make (and fly) two Balinese kites: the *reeran*, a small lightweight fighting kite, and a *bebean*, a larger fish-shaped model.

DESA BUAHAN, DESA PAYANGAN GIANYAR, BALI
62-36/198-270
orient-express.com/web/pubu/leisure-childrens-activities.jsp

Mongolia:

YURT LIVING

A few Christmases ago, we stayed with a nomadic Mongolian family in their ger, a Mongolian yurt. It was -35°F, but we enjoyed every minute, from a New Year's Eve party with shots of local moonshine to eating *momos* (dumplings), while huddled around a fire. * Experience tent living yourself with Ger to Ger, a company that arranges homestays with nomadic Mongolian families. For the winter and spring migration trip, guests help pack up the camp and move to the nomads' new location.

RATES: \$85 FOR THREE DAYS/TWO NIGHTS
976/11-31-33-36
gertogger.org

Nepal:

HIKE

Hiking with legendary mountaineer Jamling Tenzing Norgay, son of Tenzing Norgay, the first climber to successfully summit Mount Everest, with Sir Edmund Hillary, was definitely one of our most memorable experiences. Besides enjoying breathtaking sights along the way—fast-flowing rivers, terraced hills, lush valleys, and high alpine ridges—we worked hard; Norgay is one of the most interesting exercise partners in the world. * Armchair climbers can learn about Tenzing Norgay from his book, *Touching My Father's Soul*, and the IMAX movie *Everest*, which documents his 1996 summit.

Thailand:

THE BUDDHIST MONK'S HOSPITAL

We love to visit a hospital for ailing Buddhist monks where we're usually the only non-Thai people in attendance. If you're lucky, a monk will offer you a private blessing. * Visit the Buddhist Monk's Hospital and receive a blessing of your own.

SRI AYTTHAYA, BANGKOK
66-2/24-71-82-58
-ANNA WATSON



High alpine ridges don't get higher than in Nepal.