

AN A TO Z GUIDE TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR HOTEL

# TRAVEL + LEISURE

SOUTHEAST ASIA

JUNE 2013

## The Hotels Issue

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**ITALIAN LESSONS** My first major trip alone was to Rome, at 19. Day one, I woke at dawn for a marathon of a tour, but at the end I had nothing to say about what I'd seen. Rome wasn't built in a day and there was no reason I had to traverse the Eternal City's seven hills in 24 hours. The next day I sat in a café with a book, taking in the sights, smells and sounds. **MOST DAUNTING SOLO TRIP** In Thailand in late August 2008, during civil unrest, I nearly got stranded at Phuket airport. An hour after my flight to Bangkok left, mobs took over the runways and terminals at HKT and shut it down. My positive travel karma was in overdrive that day. **WHEN EATING ALONE, AVOID...** Food that can get stuck in your teeth (sorry, pesto). Sometimes you need a friend across the table to keep you in check.

**EXPLAIN "VIET KIEU"** My mother is Vietnamese—which makes me officially a *Viet kieu*, a Vietnamese returnee. Locals mostly use it for Vietnamese who were born here, lived abroad and are now back, or for second-generation Vietnamese who may have been born and raised abroad but in a Vietnamese community. Which makes me an almost perfect stranger. **WHAT DO YOU LIKE MOST ABOUT VIETNAM** The chaos. Think of the motorcycle traffic: this applies to daily life, and it also applies to work. Life in Vietnam is a joyous kind of chaos brimming with youthful optimism and very good food. **CONSERVATIVE YET PROGRESSIVE CULTURE** I really don't see it as a contradiction. There's a long history of absorbing foreign culture, and using it against invaders to repel them.

**FAVORITE REMNANTS OF "OLD SINGAPORE"** All the post-war mid-century architectural buildings, including iconic apartments like The Pearl Bank. **BEST THING ABOUT "NEW SINGAPORE"** The chance to savor cuisine by celebrity chefs—partly a consequence of the flurry of recently opened integrated resorts. **WHERE DO YOU LIVE** Sembawang, a neighborhood in the north, where there's an eclectic mix of old rustic mosques, a real hot spring, a biker bar with great pub grub and some of the best seafood vermicelli on this island. **SO WHERE TO FOR LUNCH** Kok Sen Restaurant, at 30 Keong Saik Road, one of the best Singaporean Chinese restaurants in town, and one that won't burn a hole in your pocket. Their prawn-paste fried chicken is to die for.

**'Rome wasn't built in a day and there was no reason I had to traverse the Eternal City's seven hills in 24 hours.'**

— CRISTINA DE OLIVEIRA

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF CRISTINA DE OLIVEIRA; COURTESY OF MORGAN OMMER; COURTESY OF DARREN SOH

OPINION

# Flying Solo

Finding the perfect travel companion can be as easy as looking in the mirror. Cristina M. De Oliveira helps you plan an adventure-for-one.



You can learn a lot about yourself while on the road—especially when you're not being kept awake by your travel buddy's snoring or battling with him about who gets to sit in the window seat. Whether you want to retreat to a remote corner of the world for some quiet time or meet new people in a foreign culture, it's okay to fall off the grid for a few days and not invite a single person to join you.

Traveling on your own can be a true indulgence. But you need to be in the

right headspace for it. If you're convinced that you'll be lonely, then there will be no escaping the solitude. Put aside your fears and get excited about being able to call all the shots on your vacation—from having breakfast in bed to skipping that very important museum because you would rather fit in a two-hour massage.

As the sole architect of your itinerary, you'll have more fun if you do your research. A little familiarity with your destination will go a long

way. This may sound obvious, but when you're in a country where you can't speak or decipher the language, reading a map may be a challenge. Plan out in advance some walking routes to points of interest or study the public transportation system so that you can hit the ground running upon arrival. And even though you're planning this trip to take a break from everyone for a bit, there may be moments when you miss the sound of familiar voices, so figure out how you're going to phone →

home. Buying Skype credits can be a challenge in some places, such as Vietnam. Make sure you're loaded up before you take off, or check with your service provider about using your cell phone overseas.

If you're afraid of getting bored, then map out what you want to achieve on your trip so that each day has an underlying mission. Always wanted to learn how to dive? Ready to try standing up on a surfboard? Been

putting off reading Dostoyevsky? You can spend your days ticking lingering items off of your to-do list.

A shortcut to infusing your journey with purpose is to find a local cause you believe in and try to work some volunteer days into your trip. The experience can be rewarding and eye-opening, especially during a voyage of self-discovery. **Hands Up Holidays** ([handsupholidays.com](http://handsupholidays.com)) can set you up with teaching gigs in Nepal (from

US\$5,900 for 21 days, including a trek to Everest Base Camp) or conservation work in India's Sundarbans Delta (from US\$1,800 for 11 days). Plus, the site allows you to search for projects that are specifically suited to the needs of a solo traveler.

While planning your own activities may sound like fun, eating alone can be daunting for even the most independent traveler. But remember: This could be the perfect time to treat yourself to that meal of a lifetime. Load up your tablet with good reads and settle into your reservation for one. After all, there won't be anybody else to complain about the pricey bill or judge you for eating two desserts. If you're interested in a more low-key affair, sidling up to a bar is a good way to pass the time. You may encounter other like-minded of us—or strike up a conversation with the bartender, who can probably pass along some great local tips or at least have some good stories to tell.

In the spirit of diving into the local scene, forgo a traditional hotel and rent an apartment through **Airbnb** ([airbnb.com](http://airbnb.com)) or **Flipkey** ([flipkey.com](http://flipkey.com)). On these sites you can book everything from a private studio to an entire house—or a room in a shared house if you are looking to make friends. I've had spectacular hosts who leave out guidebooks, maps and have even passed along their number in case I have any problems. In a strange way, this makes you feel like you at least know one person in town in case anything goes wrong. For the cost-conscious, **Couchsurfing** ([couchsurfing.org](http://couchsurfing.org)) will put you in touch with benevolent hosts who take in visitors free of charge and may even give you a tour of their city.

From meeting new people to getting in tune with yourself and your instincts, being the master of your itinerary is an exciting way to see the world. If I were forced to come up with a downside to traveling alone, it would have to be that you won't have anybody else to take pictures of you. Perhaps "perfect the self-portrait" is the ideal task for day one of your adventure. +

