



Fresh ... Hoi An, Vietnam, (above) and dumplings (below).
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Taste for adventure

Winsor Dobbin encourages eating outside the noodle box in Asia.

From the warming pho soups of Vietnam to the green curries of Thailand, the chilli crabs of Singapore and superb sushi and sashimi of Japan, Asia offers a cornucopia of culinary delights for any traveller with a sense of adventure.

The style of cuisine may differ wildly from country to country but there is always something to tempt the palate of the epicurious, whether it be a handful of satay sticks from a street vendor or a degustation dinner in a five-star restaurant.

Given our plummeting dollar, the good news is you do not need to splash out to enjoy an authentic and delicious Asian gourmet experience – and the food is not all noodles, rice and fish sauce. Open-air food markets offer mouth-watering choices for just a couple of dollars, as do hawker stalls and street vendors. In Japan, izakaya, or red lantern bars, offer the local equivalent of pub grub with a warm welcome. Try okonomiyaki (a tasty cross between a pancake and an omelette).

With food so much a part of different Asian cultures, it is worth stepping outside your comfort zone. Whether you are enjoying top-notch service at a waterfront restaurant or bia hoi (home-brewed beer) on a Hanoi sidewalk, your holiday will be enriched if you avoid chain restaurants and Western food for something out of the ordinary.

Hong Kong offers some of the best food you'll find anywhere in the world, from international dishes to Cantonese food and more spicy Chinese cuisines such as Sichuan and Hunanese. If you want your meal to be a real experience, why not hop on a ferry from Central or Aberdeen to the outer island of Lamma, a 30-minute ride and a very different experience to the noise of the metropolis?

Lamma has clean air, country walks and lovely beaches. There are no cars and no high-rise buildings – its main attraction is the fishing village of Sok Kwu Wan (Picnic Bay), where

you'll find a string of terraced restaurants raised on stilts above the bay.

Fresh chilli crab, garlic prawns, deep-fried squid and steamed fish with ginger are among the favourites here. Spend a fortune on crabs and lobsters or a pittance on steamed fish.

There are several restaurants to choose from, all offering similar menus, but the most popular is the Rainbow Seafood Restaurant, where favourite dishes include fried crab with honey and black pepper (about \$30) and shrimp salad with mango.

A set menu of seafood specialties costs about \$65 but it is easy to spend a lot more if you want to splash out by choosing live crustaceans or fish from the tanks.

It's no surprise that the residents of Singapore are obsessive about food. The city-state is a melting pot of cultures and cuisines with Chinese, Malay, Indian and European influences. Hawker centres such as the Newton Food Centre in Scotts Road and those at

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Clementi, Bedok and Geylang offer authentic taste sensations for just a few dollars – as do hole-in-the-wall joints in Chinatown and Little India. Start with clear fish soup or fish congee (sliced fish in rice porridge) and follow with Hainanese chicken rice, oyster omelette, chicken wings, satays or barbecued seafood such as stingray topped with sambal chilli.

For more upmarket food, higher prices and better service, try dining along the riverside at either Clarke Quay or neighbouring Boat Quay. Try the Indonesian-style dishes at the House of Sundanese Food on Boat Quay or the traditional chilli crab at the East Coast Seafood Centre, out of town on the East Coast Parkway.

Bangkok is a city where you can eat just as

well in your hotel as outside – although anyone on a tight budget can enjoy excellent street food for a dollar or two. One hotel restaurant, the perfect lunch destination, is the award-winning Basil restaurant at the luxurious Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit in the heart of downtown. Here you can enjoy stylish Thai cuisine with a modern twist and excellent service – without venturing outside to deal with the heat, hustle and bustle of one of Asia's most frenetic and exciting cities.

It's funky with a nice vibe and the dishes are not dumbed down for farang guests. Highlights of the menu (which has prices similar to Australia) are the soft-shell crab with mango salad, steamed mussels with lemongrass and sweet basil and fried rice with sun-dried pork. Every dish we tried was outstanding.

In Phuket, another hotel restaurant, Mom Tri's Kitchen, is among the standouts – and offers stunning views of Kata Noi Beach. Dishes such as hot crab soufflé, Bt380 (\$18); rock lobster ravioli and avruga caviar (Bt520); and stir-fried chicken with cashew nuts, mushroom and spring onion in oyster sauce (Bt420) are all stellar. The cheaper Restaurant 6 in downtown Patong serves terrific food (Pad Thai and barbecued prawns for Bt200) with no frills and can be just as much fun.

George Town, the capital of Penang in Malaysia, is – like Singapore – one of the most intriguing food destinations in Asia, with Chinese, Malay and Indian influences and very different tastes, sounds and aromas to the capital, Kuala Lumpur.

It's all action here: street hawkers, trishaw drivers and traditional craftsmen as well as a fabulous selection of foods, from street stalls to the luxury of the venerable Eastern & Oriental Hotel, built in 1885.

Its restaurant, named The 1885, has fusion food: try an appetiser of seared, peppered maguro (tuna), followed by quail consomme



and oven-roasted Wagyu beef fillet – but you'll pay five-star hotel prices (about \$100 each). Alternatively, you could spend just a handful of dollars on hawker food from street stalls or food courts, like a bowl of Penang laksa – a noodle dish in spicy fish broth topped with shredded vegetables. It is spicy, tangy and sour – very different to the creamy style of laksa with which Australians are more familiar.

In Vietnam, the cuisine varies wildly; from spicy duck soup or pig on a spit at Sapa in the north to green mango and banana flower salads and citrus-marinated beef further south.

Vietnamese food is invariably fresh, tasty and cheap. Wherever you go you'll find pho, a cross between soup and stew that often contains meat, noodles, greens and chillis.

To treat yourselves in Hanoi, try Restaurant Bobby Chinn, overlooking Hoan Kiem Lake, an upmarket diner with traditional touches and gracious service.

Try sticky rice dumplings filled with mung bean puree or green tea-smoked duck over black sticky rice, baby bok choy and pomegranate duck jus.

TRIP NOTES

- Rainbow Restaurant, 16-20, 23-24, First Street, Sok Kwu Wan, Lamma Island, Hong Kong. Phone +852 2982 8100.
- Basil at the Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit, 250 Sukhumvit Road, Bangkok. Phone +66 2649 8888.
- Mom Tri's Kitchen, 12 Kata Noi Beach, Phuket, 83100. Phone +66 7633 3568.
- 1885, Eastern & Oriental Hotel, 10 Lebu Farquhar, George Town, Penang, Malaysia. Phone +604 222 2000.
- Restaurant Bobby Chinn, 1 Ba Trieu Street, Hoan Kiem, Hanoi. Phone +84 4934 8577.