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## FEAST FOR THE SENSES

Food is increasingly driving our travels, rather than just fueling them, and the right gourmet guide can show you that the best way to get at a culture's heart is through the stomach.

BY DIANA HUBBELL ILLUSTRATED BY AUTCHARA PANPHAI



**“DO YOU EAT THESE?”** asks Laura, a British anesthesiologist and one of my three dining companions, gesturing to a school of opal-colored fish swimming languidly in a tank. Carrie Poon, a lifelong Hong Konger and our guide for the day, shakes her head vigorously and laughs.

“Oh no! These are for feng shui. That fish right there costs eight thousand U.S. dollars,” she says. Judging from the humble exterior of this shophouse selling traditional Cantonese barbecue, one might never guess the owner’s prosperity. As I start to count the number of iridescent bodies, as well as the certifications of their authenticity on the wall, I get a clearer picture. A rare breed of house cat with eyes like jade and spots like an ocelot—also lucky, also expensive—slinks by soundlessly. Clearly, business is good.

I find out exactly why when the first bowl arrives brimming with slippery rice noodles and hunks of roast goose. Days of marinating and a blast in the restaurant’s vertical oven, which rises to more than 400 degrees Celsius and is powerful enough to cook a whole pig in just two hours, render most of the fat, leaving behind brittle skin that crackles at first bite. Though locals have been coming to this place since 1976, most tourists mob its Michelin-starred copycat in Central.

“See the owner there, in the white T-shirt at the cash register? When his brother was in debt in the 1980s, he taught him how to roast a goose and now he’s the more successful one. To me, the goose is delicious at both, but I love the atmosphere here,” Carrie says. Having paid a visit to the sibling’s rival location, I agree—dalliers who take more than 20 minutes to finish a bowl risk being thrown into the street, and the goose is inevitably gone before noon. Here, the gracious septuagenarian shows me around the shoebox of a kitchen with a smile. “Anthony Bourdain visited this shop four years

FROM TOP: In Tai Po Market; originally from Macau, a candymaker offers samples in Hong Kong; these sumptuous roast goose noodles have made a fortune for a family business in Tai Po.



ago,” Carrie confides, “once he found out that this was the original chef behind the Michelin-worthy recipe, the true master.”

Over the next three hours, as we wander through the alleyways of sleepy Tai Po with Hong Kong Foodie Tasting Tours, I’ll hear many more stories like this, though usually in places too off-the-beaten track for even Bourdain. I’ll meet the Macanese Willy Wonka, who spins molten sugar and toasted pumpkin seeds, sesame and peanuts into addictive sweets right before our eyes. He’s generous with the samples, doling out almond cookies, blackened ginger and candied Buddha’s hand into our greedy palms. I’ll visit one of city’s last



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five shops that still makes *cheung fun* the old-fashioned way, a maddening process dependent on surgical skills and precise timing to keep the fragile dough intact. The resulting rice-flour wrappers are ethereal, disintegrating on the tongue like snowflakes and leaving behind only savory notes of the dried scallop or caramelized pork within.

It’s details like these that inspire me again and again to take food tours when I travel in any region, but especially in Asia-Pacific. All those crowdsourced TripAdvisor and Yelp reviews pale in comparison to the personal touch of a well-connected guide. Having someone who speaks the language and has forged relationships with restaurant owners and hawkers over the course of years often

opens doors that might otherwise remain shut. When executed properly, a food tour offers much more than a meal; it provides a window into a different culture and the social, political and anthropological factors that affected both the evolution of a cuisine and the society that created it.

“With food increasingly becoming a primary reason why people are traveling, food tours are the most comprehensive way to gather insight into a local culture,” says Izzy Pulido, the Saigon-based travel and food blogger behind *The Next Somewhere* who makes a point of taking one almost everywhere she goes. “It takes the anxiety out of eating and gives us a different perspective on how to explore a city.” >>

## T+L PICKS: FOOD TOURS

Much like at an all-you-can-eat buffet, trying to decide which dishes best tempt your palate can be dizzying. Here, we’ve culled our favorite food tours from around the region. Everyone’s tastes are different, but this list should give you a good primer to embark on an Asia-Pacific feeding frenzy.



### AUSTRALIA

#### Historical Cafe Society Trek, Melbourne Coffee Tours

Melbourne’s baristas are to latte art what Rembrandt was to oil painting, and the city’s cafés are the stuff of caffeine-fiend dreams. Amble with Maria Paoli, director of Australian Women in Coffee and a prominent figure in the local espresso scene for 15 years. Her knowledge of both

growing and roasting has taken her to coffee plantations all over the world, and her anecdotes make the two hours whizz by. “I see tourists standing in line for cafés all the time, unaware there are other coffee shops nearby that offer a much better experience,” Paoli says. The standard tour introduces you to the java junkies behind your flat white; the Private Xpresso Trek explores the evolution of the local coffee culture, from the first wave explosion in the early noughts, to the third wave, when artisanal brews flourished, to the still-developing fourth wave. Is it bulletproof coffee? Nitro-coffee? Hybrid coffee? Take a walk with Paoli to find out. [melbournecoffeetours.com.au](http://melbournecoffeetours.com.au); A\$40 per person.

### BURMA

#### Yangon Street Food Tours

Since swapping the French Alps for the streets of Rangoon, half-Burmese chef Marc Shortt has been scouring the local markets in search of unusual finds. On his three-hour morning and evening walks through areas like Bogalay Zay market, guests might try Shan noodles and durian lassis. “Without a guide, you’ll only get to taste a portion of Rangoon’s complex food scene. Few vendors speak English here and you can miss a lot,” Shortt says. Through his research, he’s pulled together a number of finds that go well beyond the usual tea-leaf salad stops, some in unexpected locations. “I know one lady who sells

delicious sticky rice stuffed with marinated pork in her living room. She tends to sell out fast.” Though relatively new to the scene, his walks have already proven popular with longtime local residents and expats hoping to learn something new. [fb.com/yangonstreetfoodtours](http://fb.com/yangonstreetfoodtours); breakfast walk US\$30 per person, dinner US\$35.

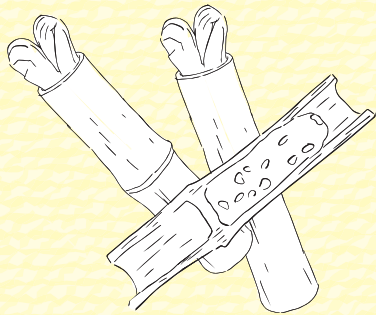
### CAMBODIA

#### A Taste of Cambodia, Backyard Travel

This week-long journey whisks travelers from Siem Reap, where you’ll take a cooking class in the countryside, sample street food and enjoy







fine dining at one of the city's top tables, to Battambang, where you'll learn to mill rice, check out local markets, and dine at a socially responsible eatery. Along the way, there's plenty of time to stop for street snacks such as *krolan* (sticky rice and black beans in bamboo) and get a feel for how the locals live. Although food is clearly the focus, the smart guides do their best to provide a broader perspective on Cambodian culture, including visits to art galleries, pagodas and, of course, the temples of Angkor. *backyardtravel.com*; seven days, six nights from US\$2,914 per person.

## CHINA Chengdu Classics, Chengdu Food Tours

"We want to use the food as a platform for telling stories, to help bridge cultural barriers, and to demystify China," says Jordan Porter, a Canadian who set up shop in Chengdu in 2010 and has a special focus on how ingredients (say, artisanal pickles) are made. The Chengdu Classics tour gives a well-rounded look at this vibrant city and includes a jaunt through a wet market and street food such as *guo kui* (bread stuffed with meat and vegetables). It culminates in a family-style dinner, often gathered around an incendiary hot pot bobbing with chilies and tongue-tingling Sichuan peppercorns. Porter and his team are all too happy to arrange for a bespoke tour that might include anything from foraging for wild edibles

to a stop at traditional teahouse in the countryside. *chengdufoodtours.com*; RMB400 per person.

## Yunnan Gastronomic Tour with Fuchsia Dunlop, WildChina

As the author of five cookbooks on Chinese cuisine and one of the few foreigners to make it through Sichuan Culinary Institute, Fuchsia Dunlop has long been regarded as one of the world's preeminent authorities on the subject. Her semi-regular tours via WildChina, a boutique luxury operator, are worthy of any foodie's bucket list. On her upcoming offering this autumn, up to 12 participants will learn the secrets of Mengzi's "Crossing the Bridge Noodles," wander through Jianshui's most famous market, visit a tea plantation, make *rushan* cheese, and cook with local families in a Bai minority village. *wildchina.com*; September 18–27, 2017; from US\$5,869 per person.

## HONG KONG

### Tai Po Market Foodie Tour, Hong Kong Foodie Tasting Tours

Despite all the attention lavished upon Hong Kong's many Michelin-starred fine dining temples, some of the best eats can still be found at humble *dai pai dong*. While Tai Po isn't the rural backwater it once was, the area still has a decidedly local vibe and plenty



A feast in  
Chengdu.



of low-key mom-and-pop-run shophouses where everything is made from scratch. Thanks to the slightly out-of-the-way location, the Tai Po Market tours tend to be less popular than guided walks through Central and Kowloon, meaning the group sizes are small and flexibility high. As you roam through a market still devoid of tourists, you'll sample all sorts of sweets and savories, learning the stories behind each of the businesses from one of the enthusiastic local guides. *hongkongfoodietours.com*; HK\$890 per person.

## JAPAN

### Tokyo Food Tours, Yukari and Shinji Sakamoto

Author of *Food Sake Tokyo*, Yukari Sakamoto has a vast knowledge of Japanese cuisine. The fact that her husband, Shinji, is a fishmonger and former regular buyer at Tsukiji Market makes these outings a must for gourmands looking to venture beneath the surface of Tokyo's



Tokyo  
fishmongers.

## MALAYSIA

### Brunch Tour, Food Tour Penang

Street food is so prevalent George Town, Penang, it almost requires more effort to avoid the seasoned woks of *char kway teow* and the heaping platters of samosas than to find them. Still, a local guide can be invaluable when deciding which of all these tasty offerings merit stomach

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With so many food tours on the market, choosing the right one can be a daunting task. A quick scan through Viator reveals a seemingly infinite list of options, each touting its own authenticity. Laura Woo, an agent who specializes in arranging tours in her childhood homes of Hong Kong and Macau, says the first step is honing in on your own expectations and doing a little homework on the local culture. "When it comes to food in Southeast Asia, no two people are alike. Some demand Michelin-starred restaurants and some prefer to eat like a local in an outdoor eatery," she says. In other words, the hearty snake soup served on some Hong Kong Foodie Tours through Kowloon may thrill certain guests and repulse others. When matching her clients up with guides, Woo makes sure to find out how long a guide has been working, how long they've lived in the area, and how accommodating they can be to special dietary restrictions or requests.

If those requests happen to be very specific, whether you want to seek out a particularly niche dish or have strict food intolerances, it may be worth springing for a bespoke tour. "On private tours, guides adapt around the client, and not the other way around. Join-in group tours are a bit more tricky," says Maeve Nolan, who seeks out guides all over Southeast Asia as the general manager of Backyard Travel. Yet while private tours offer flexibility,



group tours can still be worthwhile, provided you ask the right questions beforehand. "It's important to determine how many people will join the tour. If the answer is, say, 15, then this will ruin experience," Nolan says. "Travelers also need to ask what's included, as you don't want to be hit with pesky bills for small items."

Whether you opt for a small group or a private experience, the first thing you want to look for is either the guide's or the operator's track record and experience with the local food scene. A tour run by a prominent food writer, blogger, or chef who has staked their reputation on their in-depth, intimate knowledge of the local culinary landscape will usually offer a better experience than a small startup. Naturally, tour operators with higher credentials seldom come cheap.

"A general rule of thumb is you get what you pay for. And any tour under two hours is, for the most part, underwhelming," Pulido says. In her experience, a well-run tour more than merits the slight splurge. "On a recent food tour around Saigon, I was guided down the maze-like thoroughfare of the Ho Thi Ky Flower Market, where a 60-year-old stand selling Cambodian-style Vietnamese dessert soup lay hidden among stalls hawking >>



FROM TOP: Durian in Tai Po Market; all the dumplings you can shove in your face; incense hangs in the air at a Tai Po temple.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DIANA HUBBELL; COURTESY OF FOODSAKETOKYO.COM; COURTESY OF CHENGDU FOOD TOURS

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hydrangeas. The ‘dessert soup’ turned out to be a shaved ice treat doused in coconut milk and topped with red beans and candied bananas. My favorite part: what I thought was a spool of cheese floss turned out to be noodles made from egg yolk and sugar. Definitely not what I was expecting, but that’s the beauty of a food tour.”

Ultimately, the biggest question may be what a guide’s individual outlook is and what they hope travelers take away from the experience. Look for guides who are either local or have lived in the destination for a considerable amount of time and who express a curiosity about the cuisine. If you’re not sure, reach out to them directly via email; their response should give you a clearer sense of what you’re getting yourself into.

“A good tour guide also needs to see the bigger picture. Culture and food are intertwined. Both impact each other. A nation’s weather, politics and history are all reflected in its cuisine,” says Marc Shortt, a chef who leads street food tours around Rangoon. “The best food tours feel more like an old friend taking you around their neighborhood and saying, ‘You have got to try this!’”

Which is exactly how I feel after a day of nibbling my way through Tai Po Market. Over the course of the afternoon, we’ve discussed everything from the railway that shaped this corner of town to Chinese traditional medicine. By the time we reach the last stop, a traditional *dai pai dong* in a municipal center, the four of us are laughing and downing beer



FROM TOP: Many vendors use squid, but one Hong Kong stand makes this addictive snack with tastier cuttlefish; rice rich with oily crab roe at a traditional eatery.

like old friends. We sink our chopsticks into crab rice, slick and oily with bright orange roe, at an unassuming stand run by an interior designer who gave up a decades-long career to pursue her dream of cooking.

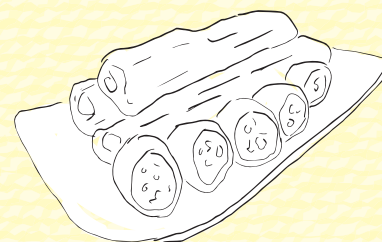
“It’s getting harder to find places like this where everything is made by hand,” Carrie says. “If you know where to look, you can still come across these slivers of old Hong Kong.”

Thanks to her, we do know where to look. Headed back to Central, bags bulging with handmade candy and porcelain bowls, we pass by the same route we came, but see it with fresh eyes. We glance back at the candy-makers, the dumpling masters, the artisans holding translucent sheets of tofu skin for dim sum—the living pieces of the city’s history, still vital to its modern flavor. +

## THE DIGITAL GUIDE

Tokyo is both one of the world’s richest and most impenetrable food cities. The best eateries are usually hard-to-find and English-language information is sparse. Enter **Ramen Beast**, an app created by two Japanese-speaking noodle fanatics cataloging the city’s best spots. “There are some 10,000 shops in the Tokyo metropolitan area, and innovation is constant. There are whole magazines devoted to ramen subculture, but very little good info is available in English,” says co-founder Patrick Brzeski, who wolfed down 5,000 bowls with his partner in crime, Abram Plaut, in pursuit of the best. “We’ve been eating ramen in Tokyo nearly every day for a decade; we created Ramen Beast to share some of what we’ve learned and to show our respect for the Japanese masters who keep this amazing food scene humming.” [ramenbeast.com](http://ramenbeast.com); free; iOS.

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space. All the guides are born and raised in the area, so they know all the good spots, and since group sizes never exceed eight, you’ll have plenty of time to stop at each one. The four-hour brunch walk through hawker stands for such delights as *Penang lobak* (fried meat roll) will make you forget all about your usual eggs Benedict. [foodtourpenang.com](http://foodtourpenang.com); US\$62 per person.

## PHILIPPINES

### The Big Binondo Food “Wok,” Old Manila Walks

Ivan Man Dy and Anson Yu share their exhaustive knowledge and boundless enthusiasm for their hometown on six guided trips through some of Manila’s most culturally diverse neighborhoods. This gloriously gluttonous option takes three to four hours and traverses the streets of Binondo, which dates all the way back to 1594 and is said to be the world’s oldest Chinatown. Along the way, you’ll learn all about Tsinoy history and dine on as much Filipino-Chinese fusion fare as you can handle. [oldmanilawalks.com](http://oldmanilawalks.com); P1,400 per person.

### Mangan Kapampangan, Bryan Ocampo

Any day that starts with *lechon pugon*, or pork belly slow-roasted in a brick oven, is guaranteed to be good. After this breakfast of champions, embark on a calorie-packed 13-hour day through Guagua, Mexico and San Fernando in the province of Pampanga. “Food is a product of the Kapampangan’s experience

with the conquistadores, Celestial traders, natural disasters and the rich bounty of the their land,” says director of operations Bryan Ocampo, a half-Pampango who proudly leads travelers to a sweets factory and baking lessons with local chef Lillian Lising de Borromeo. They have exclusive access to family-run businesses in the province, and hosts will walk you through their dishes to give a better understanding of your meal. [mangankapampangan.com](http://mangankapampangan.com); P2,900 per person.

## SOUTH KOREA

### Chicken & Beer Pub Crawl, Korea Food Tours

Fried chicken inspires a level of devotion in South Korea that verges on religious fervor. Batter recipes, which might include anything from vodka to instant pudding powder, are zealously guarded secrets and asking a group of Seoulites which place has the best wings is a good way to incite a brawl. These boozy crawls may not settle the dispute, but they’ll introduce you to a bunch of the top places. The fact that they’re led by Joe McPherson, founder of one of South Korea’s most famous food blogs, ZenKimchi, and Cory May, a Korean-American YouTube star and self-professed KFC-junkie, adds to the fun. [koreafoodtours.com](http://koreafoodtours.com); US\$59—\$89 per person.

## THAILAND

### Thonburi Food & Art Walk, Chin’s Chili Paste Tour

Bangkok’s labyrinthine back alleys can be daunting, which is why Chawadee Nualkhair, the food blogger behind *Bangkok Glutton* and the author of multiple books on Thai street food, recommends turning to a pro like Chin

Chongtong, a resident of the capital for more than a decade and an avid foodie. “You see the real Thailand that most other tourists don’t see,” says Chawadee. Of course, she also really knows her stuff.” Chin’s day tour around Banglamphu is her most popular, but this walk on the less-traveled Thonburi side of the Chao Phraya River will take you to places virtually no tourists ever go. [foodtoursbangkok.com](http://foodtoursbangkok.com); Bt2,000 per person.

## VIETNAM

### Bespoke Saigon Tours, Grain Cooking Studio

Celebrity chef, TV star and author of seven cookbooks, Luke Nguyen is a Vietnamese cuisine ambassador. Curious foodies can book a fully customized day tour through Grain, his cooking school in Saigon. “I want to make sure every visitor who comes to this country raves about it. I want to take you to places you’ll never think of going,” Nguyen says. His guides can showcase anything from local markets to fine-dining tables. For those with a bit more time and budget, he also personally leads extended journeys through Vietnam with **APT** ([aptouring.com](http://aptouring.com)) several times a year. These trips are rare and tend to book out months in advance, but the chance to see the land through the eyes of

this gregarious, encyclopaedic chef is worth it. “I sometimes take groups to my old family neighborhood, where my parents were born and where my aunts and uncles still live,” he says. “It’s stepping back into the old Saigon, the real Saigon.” [grainbyluke.com](http://grainbyluke.com); all itineraries are bespoke and priced upon request.

### Hanoi Gourmet Trails, Trails of Indochina

Wander the atmospheric streets of the Vietnamese capital in search of pho, *bun cha*, *che*, *banh cuon*, and coffee enriched with golden egg yolks in the Old Quarter, then join forces with a chef for a market trip and cooking class. As one of Vietnam’s first luxury tour companies, Trails of Indochina offers travelers a wealthy network that allows you access to experiences like making *banh chung* (sticky rice cakes) at the home of a budding young chef from one of the city’s top culinary families. [trailsofindochina.com](http://trailsofindochina.com); three-day, two-night tours are customizable and priced on request.

