

# TRAVEL

TRAVELING ON A BUDGET

5

CHEAPEST PLACES TO TRAVEL  
WITH MAREK BRON



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A person with a backpack is standing on a rocky cliff, looking out at a vast ocean under a sunset sky. The person is wearing a denim jacket, a white t-shirt, and black pants. The ocean is a deep blue, and the sky is a mix of orange, pink, and blue. The rocks are dark and jagged.

# CONTENT

**1**  
*VIETNAM*

**2**  
*INDONESIA*

**3**  
*MEXICO*

**4**  
*CROATIA*

**5**  
*ALBANIA*



# V I E T N A M



Halong Bay, Vietnam, photo taken by Fuu J

visit one or both of the major cities (Hanoi and Saigon). Many backpackers stop by the seaside resorts of Nha Trang or Mui Ne. These places sometimes get mixed reviews, but they can be fun unpretentious places to party or hang by a swimming pool. Want something quieter? Then I quite like the seaside town of Qui Nhon. But my own personal favorite places include Hue, a city with many pagodas and temples, Ninh Binh (sometimes called the Ha Long Bay on land), Phong Nha (home to the world's largest caves) and Ha Giang Province (an amazing mountain region).

There's no getting around the fact that the climate is just very different in the north, center, and south, which are very geographically separated. While much of the country is tropical, keep in mind the north is in a temperate zone. Expect the mountainous north to be a little cold in winter. Even in autumn or spring it can be a bit cold at night. If you're going in summer, expect it to be very hot and humid. The best chance of clear skies in Halong Bay is in April to June, and September/October. For central and south Vietnam, the wet season is something to keep in mind. For central Vietnam (e.g. Hoi An, Hue, Da Nang) this is in October / November. In the south (e.g. Ho Chi Minh City) it's May until October.

For more information and research go to <https://www.indietraveller.co/vietnam-travel-guide/>

Vietnam is one of the most popular backpacking destinations in Asia — and with good reason. Its epic natural sites, mouth-watering food, insanely bustling cities, distinct culture, and low cost have drawn backpackers and holidayers alike for decades. The honest truth is that Vietnam has a bit of a reputation for tourist traps and some over commercialized areas. But it also has some of the most amazing and authentic experiences in all of Asia. How you travel will hugely affect your impressions of this beautiful country. Night buses and overnight trains are a common way to efficiently cover more ground. Despite its size, many travelers try to cover the whole length of the country in one trip. To do such an itinerary justice you need at least 3 weeks (but ideally 4 weeks). If you have only one or two weeks in Vietnam, then consider focusing on just the north + center, or the center + south.

Vietnam has several places that are very popular and that most people end up including in their itinerary. There's Halong Bay, a collection of thousands of small limestone islands off the coast that you can see as part of a sailing trip. The town of Sapa in the north is famous for its rice terraces and mountain treks. Hoi An is a touristy but very atmospheric town with many things to do and that a lot of backpackers rate as their favorite. And finally, in the south is the Mekong Delta region, where you can see floating markets on the river, where loads of little boats converge to sell fruits and vegetables. Besides these, you'll probably also want to



Hoi An, Vietnam, photo taken by Peter Borter

# I N D O N E S I A



*Buddhist monk in Borobudur, Java, Indonesia photo taken by Alain Bonnardeaux*

the beaches have dark volcanic pebbles instead of powdery white sand, which means fewer people visit these parts... but that's precisely what makes them great. Consider visiting the small fishing villages of Lovina and Amed, or take a boat to the small island of Nusa Lembongan.

Lombok is right next door to Bali, just a 2,5-hour boat ride away. It might not have all the cute little houses and Hindu shrines that you find on Bali, but what it does have is unspoiled beaches and amazing nature without the crowds. Lombok is a bit less explored, but it's also a more authentic place to go. The main attraction is Mount Rinjani, a volcano that you can hike up to as part of many multi-day trekking tours. The various waterfalls, villages, etc. around the island are also well worth exploring. Kuta on Lombok (not to be confused with Kuta on Bali) is a small and low-key surfer town that's fun to visit as well. But the biggest magnet for visitors to Lombok are the Gili Islands, a group of three islands. The biggest island, Gili Trawangan, is also the busiest, but for a much more relaxing time, head to neighboring Gili Meno or Gili Air. There aren't as many people here and the slow pace will feel like a breath of fresh air. Anything you can do on Trawangan (scuba diving, snorkeling, yoga, bike rental, etc.) you can also do on Gili Air, just don't look for a big night out.

For more information and research go to <https://www.indietraveller.co/indonesia-travel-guide/>

Java is Indonesia's main island and home of its capital city, Jakarta. Most famously, it's home to Borobudur, the largest Buddhist temple in the world. The nearby city of Yogyakarta is a great cultural hub and a good base from which to visit Borobudur as well as other temples like Prambanan. As you go further east on Java, you'll find some incredible volcanos. The still-active Mt. Bromo is a spectacular sight, especially at sunrise. Then there's the blue-flame spewing Ijen volcano, where you can go right into its sulfur-spewing crater. The epic Sewu Waterfall was recently put on the map, so to speak, by several travel vloggers. It takes a little trek to get there and is still relatively little-known.

Bali is by far Indonesia's biggest tourist destination. The vibe on Bali ranges widely from crass commercialism in Kuta, the main tourist area in the city of Denpasar, to pleasantly low-key further inland. Kuta is a bit of a congested maze of little streets and alleyways... with a mix of hostels, hotels, spas, tacky souvenir shops, scooter rentals, Western brand stores, and a whole lot more. Bali also attracts a gentler crowd especially around the inland village of Ubud. There are many beautiful temples to visit in and around Ubud, the tourist shops sell genuinely impressive handicrafts and local art, and the surrounding hills are wonderful for an afternoon hike. Another major traveler hub can be found along the beach in Canggu, popular with Australian surfers and digital nomads from around the world. Along the north and northeast coast many of



*Rice terraces north of Ubud, Tegelalang, Bali, photo taken by Niklas Weiss*

# MEXICO



Chichén Itzá, Mérida, Mexico, photo taken by Marv Watson

and takes hours to prepare. Oaxaca is also where the drink of mezcal originates and has a lot of cultural festivals throughout the year. It's also a fantastic place to experience the Dia de Los Muertos, the day during which people pay their respects to the dead.

The whole of the Yucatán Peninsula is firmly established on the traveler map, famed as it is for its white-sand beaches, huge cave systems called cenotes, the epic ruins of Chichén Itzá, the mangroves and wetlands of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, as well as the Great Mayan Reef. The latter is the world's second largest barrier reef (after the one in Australia) making it a true paradise for snorkelers and scuba divers, with the island of Cozumel being a favored base for reef excursions. The Yucatán peninsula is home to countless underground sinkholes, caverns and caves that stretch for countless miles. Once considered highly sacred to the Maya as portals to the underworld, many of these so-called cenotes have been made accessible for swimming or scuba diving.

Mexico's Pacific Coast is not always as immediately picturesque as the Caribbean, at least if you're looking for that classic travel brochure look of white sand and palm trees. But there are tons of nice bays and charming beach towns that are well worth a stop.

For more information and research go to <https://www.indietraveller.co/mexico-travel-guide/>

Many trips to Mexico start in the capital. But with 12 million inhabitants, Mexico City is a bit of a beast. You might find it a bit overwhelming at first... so take a deep breath. This is not a place you'll want to rush. Mexico City is brimming with history, breathtaking architecture, incredible art and museums, limitless entertainment, and some of the best street food that will ever hit your tastebuds. Many travelers end up staying in the central area around Zócalo main plaza, and this is not a bad place to be based. But there are countless other neighborhoods, each with something different to discover. There are some great day-trips and tours you can do from Mexico City, such as: Seeing the ancient pyramids of Teotihuacan, visiting the wonderful pueblo magico of Cholula, hiking the scenic mountain pass of Paso de Cortes, or visiting the historical town of Tepoztlán

Oaxaca state is known as one of the most bio-diverse states, one of the food capitals of Mexico, as well as being home to many indigenous peoples including the Zapotecs and the Mixtecs. The city of the same name received UNESCO world heritage status and is one of the cultural tourism gems of Mexico. It also serves as a great base for exploring the landscapes of Oaxaca Valley as well as the ancient archaeological site of Monte Albán. In Oaxaca, you just have to try the mole, the legendary sauces are probably nothing like you've tasted before. The traditional black sauce, mole negro, can contain dozens of different ingredients and



Yokdzonot Cenote in Yucatán, Mexico, photo taken by Ruben Hanssen

# C R O A T I A



Dubrovnik, Croatia, photo taken by Spencer Davis

and its many churches, monasteries and palaces, it is quite possibly the most picturesque place in Croatia. Dubrovnik's maze of little side streets is also fun to explore, though don't expect any grand discoveries here apart from maybe some stray cats and a few more tourist restaurants. Consider a walking tour through the Old Town to gain a much better appreciation beyond just seeing the old facades. The city is used regularly for location shoots for TV shows and movies, most famously starring as King's Landing in Game of Thrones.

Hvar is a little flashy and the rich mostly hang out in their luxury resorts and exclusive private coves, leaving the town itself to a more diverse mix of visitors. Split is very pretty with its palm-lined boulevard along the harbor and its small historic center built around the remains of a Roman palace. Standing surrounded by the Diocletian's Palace's remarkably intact Roman arches gives you a real sense of ancient history.

The southern Dalmatian islands are among the most popular places to visit in Croatia and many people go on an island hopping tour here. A typical itinerary takes you from Split to Dubrovnik via Drač, Hvar and Korčula, with usually a few different smaller stops thrown in as well. To see the islands you have essentially two choices: do-it-yourself by taking catamaran ferries to some of the largest islands, or taking an organized 1-week mini cruise.

For more information and research go <https://www.indietraveller.co/croatia-travel-guide/>

Croatia is one of Europe's most fun destinations, offering a mix of cultural and historical highlights with plenty of fun in the sun. Beware: the coast does get crowded in summer, especially August. Luckily, Croatia hasn't seen the kind of large-scale tourist development compared to other Mediterranean coastlines (such as in Spain), so while it can be busy in summer it's also very charming. If you love cute Medieval towns, beautiful islands and waterfalls, and historical cities, then Croatia is the place for you.

There are several key reasons to go to Croatia. Venetian and Roman-era historical sights; Once the heart of the Ragusan republic, the Dalmatian coast is dotted with old forts, monasteries, churches, and city walls. Well-preserved Roman ruins can be found in Split and Pula. Beaches & island hopping; Croatia is an ideal summer destination with warm Mediterranean waters, pleasant pebble beaches, and one of the best areas in Europe for island hopping excursions. National parks & waterfalls; Don't miss Plitvice, one of Europe's most beautiful waterfalls, though Krka has a lot going for it as well. Great travel circuit; Lots of fun hostels and easy transportation links make winding down the coast a breeze. Music festivals. Croatia has made a name for itself with numerous (mostly electronic) music festivals.

The old city of Dubrovnik was once a maritime city-state with a wealth and influence rivaling that of Venice. Today, with its still intact Medieval city walls



Split, Croatia, photo taken by Avery Meeker



# A L B A N I A



Theth, Albania, photo taken by Abenteuer Albanien

Being just 400 or so years old and only proclaimed capital in 1920, Tirana is perhaps not where you will find much ancient history. This city is not always so superficially beautiful either, though it's a dynamic place filled with creativity, culture and eclectic architecture. Tirana is the ideal place to learn about Albania's modern history. The fantastic Bunk'art museum can be found inside one of Albania's most extensive bunkers, once built as a shelter for the political and military elite in case of a nuclear attack. The abandoned tunnels, rooms, and assembly halls make for a somewhat surreal environment, reminding me of fallout shelters as eerily depicted in post-apocalyptic video games—except, of course, being real. Besides offering insight into Albania's past as an isolated and paranoid police state, the museum hosts various modern art installations.

After exploring the cities and nature, you may be longing for the beach and a relaxing end to your Albania trip. Luckily, Albania is blessed with a stunning coastline, with the southern stretch sometimes referred to as the Albanian Riviera. When compared to Greece or Croatia, Albania's coast is barely developed. You may well find an isolated hotel, resort or campsite on a beach that is otherwise totally wild and unspoiled. There are precious few places in Europe where you can still find this.

For more information and research go <https://www.indietraveller.co/albania-travel-guide/>

In Albania, at times, you feel like you are traveling elsewhere. Perhaps somewhere further beyond the European continent, like Turkey or Georgia or even further into Asia. Partly this can be explained by Albania being a developing country. The way you travel around Albania is typically using its motley fleet of mini buses, and at times through remote roads where goats have the right of way. Albania also stands out for cultural reasons. The Albanian language is unique, totally unconnected to any other European language. Despite most Albanians being agnostic, it's one of the few Muslim majority countries in Europe.

Albania's second-largest city Shkodra, also known as Shkodër, is quite a lovely city. Its centre has been delightfully renovated with pedestrian streets lined with cafes, ice cream parlors and restaurants. For many travelers, Shkodra serves mainly as a starting point heading into the Accursed Mountains. Hiking, camping or simply visiting this region is one of the highlights in Albania.

From Theth, you can hike to the Grunas waterfall as well as to the Blue Eye waterfall. Both make for wonderful afternoon hikes to get there. The waters are amazingly clear. The Theth-Valbonë hike is so well known that it is commonly called 'thehike' by many backpackers. There are many other hikes from Theth, though they are not as well-known or well-promoted as the Valbonë hike. A joint initiative, Peaks of the Balkans, has created an epic through-hike between Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro; this multi-day trail also passes through Theth.



Sarandë, Albania, photo taken by Taylor Simpson