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Front cover:

Mt. Fuji provides a dramatic backdrop for paragliding off the Asigiri Plateau.

Back Cover:

Sunrise over the Monument Valley, Arizona.

This Page:

A photographer works to get the last light in Sand Dunes National Monument, Colorado.

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Letter From the Editor



Summer is officially here! In some places the heat and humidity have already reared their ugly heads. Some places have had better luck. Late season snowfall has bestowed phenomenal ski conditions upon the high country. This month we'll take a look at one such area, Pikes Peak, where late-May skiing is a reality and things are looking good for the possibility of some June skiing as well. While those out west are enjoying the "climb one day, ski the next" treasure for those of use elsewhere surfing, climbing, and other warm weather activities are in full swing.

If you need a little something to cool you down check out one girl's adventure to Laos where she experiences a water party like never before. Apparently the people of Laos ring in

the new year with a nation-wide water fight, and no one is immune.

Also this month check out a dream fulfilled for one girl paragliding near Mt. Fuji in Japan. All the views without actually having to climb it.

Also this month a couple new products to keep your back-country booze, be it beer or wine, in their intended form, an update from our four-legged editor and media reviews you've come to expect.

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EDITORIAL

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STANLEY**

BUSINESS OFFICE

ADVENTURE INSIDER MEDIA, LLC
4465 NORTHPARK DR.
SUITE 100
COLORADO SPRINGS, CO 80907

Adventure Insider Magazine is published by Adventure Insider Media, LLC on a quarterly basis in March, June, September and December.

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Lightning strikes the desert in Arizona. Lightning is common during the summer monsoon season.
Nikon D700, 15s, f4.5, 200iso
Photo: Nate Burgess



A Tuna awaits processing at the Tsukiji Fish Market, Tokyo, Japan
Nikin D200, 1/3, f5.3, 100iso
Photo: Erick Pound

Halstatt, Salzkammergut, Austria
Nikin D200, 1/80, f4.8, 100iso
Photo: Ryan Kirkland



The sun sets over the beach of Tamarindo, Costa Rica
Nikon D200, 1/350, f10, 100iso
Photo: Elizabeth Cox



Contributors



Angelene Orth

Angie Orth is a location independent globe trekker. Born in Jacksonville, FL, and ultimately landing in Manhattan, she recently left a career in travel PR for adventures on the road. She's passionate about the Florida Gators, trying everything at least once, and storytelling at www.angieaway.com.



Holly Smale

Holly Miranda Smale is a writer, teacher and ex-PR Girl from a place in England that you won't have heard of unless you read the back of packets of Shredded Wheat, and has never been referred to as "the love child of Anne of Green Gables and Adrian Mole" in her life.

Over the past twenty nine years, Holly has wanted to be: a ballerina, a starving poet, an airplane pilot, Claire Danes, a scientist, a spaceman, a journalist and an internationally best-selling author. She has been: a courgette packer, a dinner lady, a cleaner, a (very bad) fashion model, a PR executive, a receptionist, and a door-to-door salesman. Holly has improbably high hopes that one day something on these two lists will match.

However, until or unless this happens, she fully intends to continue "gadding around the world with no shoes on" and can only hope that when further gadding becomes impossible her younger sister will convert the shed so that she can wrap herself in a blanket and live in it during the winter months.

She lives at www.thewritegirl.co.uk, and is currently based in Japan.



CJ Sidebottom

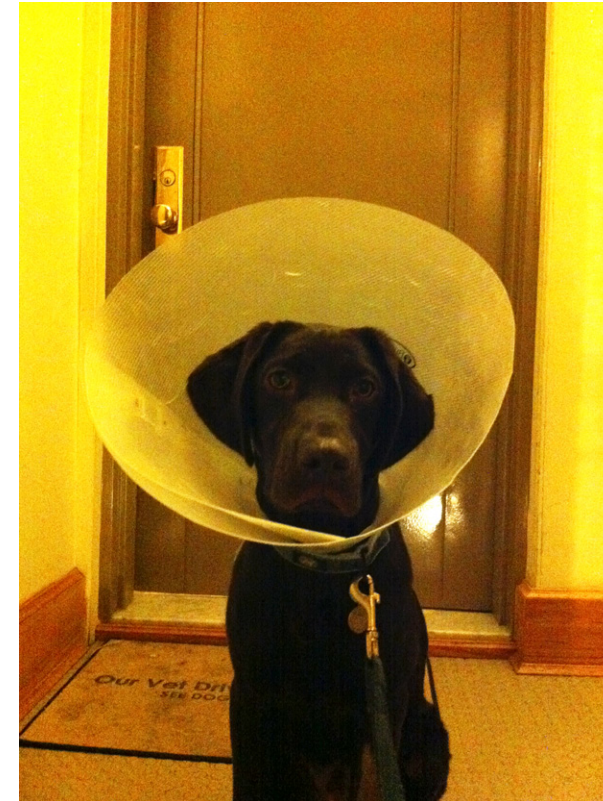
C.J. Grew up a long way from anything resembling the Front Range of Colorado where he now calls home. He was closer to the highest point in Kansas that the red sandstone towers of the Garden of the Gods. C.J. left cow-tipping country and headed to the big city for college. He stumbled upon a couple of climber while in college and quickly developed a passion for the sport. Working as the climbing coordinator for the college and as a guide for the Front Range Climbing Company during the summer his skills and love for the sport grew rapidly. While in college C.J. took the opportunity to dabble in white water kayaking, mt. biking, backpacking, and some backcountry skiing. Today C.J. spends almost all of his free time pulling on rock across the western US. He retires a lot of ropes falling on cams, nuts, bolts, old scary pins, crash pads and the occasional ice screw all within the given year.

Canine Corner

Tips on spending time with your best friend and reviews the latest K9 gear. If you have a tip or want us to review something e-mail us at submissions@adventureinsider.com

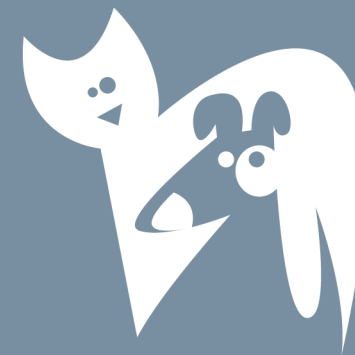
Stanley seems to be settling into his role as the K-9 Editor here at Adventure Insider. His first pack has arrived and he has been taking some dayhikes trying desperately to get in shape to wear it. Once Stanley recovers from his puppy surgery (Balls!) he'll be back out there; hiking, trips to the crag, backpacking and trying his hand at swimming again (for a lab he has a surprising love-hate relationship with the water).

For the rest of our readers with four-legged friends, get your pups outside and enjoy the fresh air. BUT be prepared to take good care of those furry friends. Always carry plenty of water and be alert for signs of exhaustion and dehydration such as an excessively red tongue, tacky gums, lack of urination and (in extreme cases) sunken eyes. Remember, dogs don't sweat so they need to be kept cool, especially when it's hot and humid. Shade, cool water, and the occasional swim will help with this.



Also, keep your pets up-to-date on all of their preventive medications, such as heartworm medication (heartworm is transmitted through mosquito bites), flea and tick repellent medication such as Frontline or K-9 Advantix, and if you're in a tick-heavy area, consider a Lyme disease vaccine.

Remember, it is your job to keep your buddy safe. The more comfortable they are, the more fun they have on their adventures with you. And, the more fun you have with them... Happy trails!



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HEARD: Roger Clyne and the Peacemakers -- Unida Cantina



Roger Clyne has long been a favorite of most of us here at Adventure Insider and our friends. So when Roger Clyne and the Peacemakers released their new Album, *Unida Cantina* April 19th we were quick to snatch up copies. While some of the songs offer a slightly reggae sound and most are more polished than vintage Roger Clyne, the album is a hit -- even if it did take a few listens for us to really be convinced. And frankly, with lyrics like “so tell gravity to kiss my ass” how can you go wrong? If you’re a fan of Roger Clyne or want some new upbeat climbing music, check it out. And if you have nothing to do the weekend of June 11 check out Circus Mexicus 10. Each year Roger Clyne and the Peacemakers invite a few thousand of their closest friends to Rocky Point, Mexico and perform a four-hour set full of almost every song in their catalog. Parties start in Arizona up to a week in advance. A true bender to be sure.

SEEN: Teton Gravity Research -- A Tiny Day in the Jackson Hole Backcountry

From the producer’s website: “This mountain is like nothing you have skied before! Spend a day riding the tiny tram and shredding miniature backcountry lines in Jackson Hole.” This little film hit an eye-popping 300,000 views in the first month it was posted on Vimeo (www.vimeo.com). If you are familiar with a photography method known as tilt-shift to produce selective focus you know what you are in for. If you don’t, just know you are in for a treat. It’s a great way to break up your workday and is just plain fun to watch.
<http://bit.ly/gaEPgn>

SEEN: Patagonia -- Vertical Sailing Greenland

After watching this five part series I am ready to start planning my trip to Greenland. Vertical Sailing Greenland follows a group of very strong Scottish climbers sporting even stronger beards as they sail from Scotland to Greenland in search of unclimbed big walls. While sailing the ‘Dodo’s Delight’ captain Bob Shepton comes across a monstrous sea cliff which he dubs the ‘Impossible Wall.’ Capt. Shepton tells the ‘Wild Boys’ about it and the epic three month trip ensues. The trip would see the boys face horrid storms, both sailing and climbing, all while bagging nine first accents. While ticking off most in 30 to 42 hour alpine style accents the ‘Impossible Wall’ takes 11 days to complete. While Vertical Sailing Greenland was not the most over the top climbing film, it is truly an intriguing and unique story. The scenery is breathtaking seeing the sheer amount of rock made my palms sweat in anticipation. It is a documentary about a trip few have dreamed about and only the ‘Wild Boys’ and Capt. Shepton have completed.
<http://video.patagonia.com/pages/vertical-sailing-greenland>

UPCOMING: Bouldering in Central Park

New York City will play host to the second event of the Unified Bouldering Championships Pro Tour June 23-25 in Central Park. The event will be held in conjunction with the 7th annual Adventure NYC and will feature numerous demonstrations, giveaways, and activities sponsored by North Face and Backpacker Magazine to name a few. The competition will be held between 4 and 6:30p.m. at mineral springs with demonstrations and warm-ups beforehand.
http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_things_to_dolevents/output_pages/adventures_nyc.php

UPCOMING: Bring Your Dog to Work Day

June 24th is National Bring Your Dog to Work Day. Bringing our four legged friends to the office is not only a nice reward for them but is a welcome distraction for most of us as well. Now is the time to start discussing this with your employer, pick out your pup’s nicest tie and let him earn his allowance this week.

Hydro Flask 64 oz. Wide-mouth Vacuum Insulated Stainless Steel Growler

Call it four pints or just shy of a six-pack, or you can just call it awesome. They call it the Hydro Flask 64 oz. wide-mouth vacuum insulated stainless steel growler. I mean, sure you could put something else in it (water, chili, what have you...), but I purchased mine for beer transport. My local brewery offers growlers and six-packs to go. For the sake of convenience I prefer a large vessel (no bottle deposit or return, and I do all my own recycling -- if you know what I mean). Previously I have used a glass growler for these purposes, but this poses its own challenges: how do you keep it from getting broken? In the past, I’ve used bungee cords to hold my growler down, but on one occasion somehow it freed itself and broke in the back of my Jeep... \$11 wasted and the great the smell of barley and hops is replaced by the rotten egg smell in few days. (Then I had to break out the vinegar and clean like a madman.) Also, keeping a glass growler cold can be an uphill battle. All in all, I’m left wishing I had something better. With a Hydro Flask Growler, now I do. Hydro Flask makes great vacuum stainless steel insulated bottles that have kept my coffee hot for up to 12 hours and my water cold for up to 24 hours. They come in sizes ranging from 12 to 40 oz. Yet even the 40 oz. size was not enough capacity to satisfy for my passion for good brew. Enter the Hydro Flask growler. The beer is fresh and cold when you get home or four hours later or even the next day. This past weekend I filled up my growler with some Mackinac Island Fudge Stout from the Corner Brewery in Ypsilanti, MI. This beer is pretty rich, so I could only drink a couple pints. The next day I finished off my growler and was amazed that the beer was cold and fresh just like the night before. Plus, the double insulation prevents sweating, so no coaster required! The lid is not insulated but Hydro Flask has informed me that they will be offering an insulated lid soon. Cheers to that.

\$49.99
www.hydroflask.com
Christopher Sorel -- Saline, MI



Platypus PlatyPreserve Wine Preserver

The PlatyPreserve wine preserver from Platypus is a pretty sweet way to keep a bottle of wine in decent shape for your outdoor adventures. However, the only difference between this and a Platypus SoftBottle seems to be that the PlatyPreserve is about the right size (800ml) to hold a standard bottle of wine (750ml), and costs two dollars more. Although if you do decide to go the route of the SoftBottle ensure you get the screw-on closure cap as you wouldn’t want a bottle of red and a bottle of white to spill all over your gear. We did test the PlatyPreserve at picnics, day hikes, and over-nighters. I wouldn’t recommend putting a 1945 Chateau Mouton-Rothschild in one of these it held up rather well. And if you need to store wine longer than a couple days, you, my friend, need to drink more wine.
\$9.95
<http://cascadedesigns.com>
Erick Pound



Spring Skiing on the Worst of Days

by CJ Sidebottom



Although above-average snowfall in the Colorado mountains put ski resorts well above their averages, the front range of Colorado was painfully dry.

No one complained during their commutes to work, but those of us who enjoy a good day of skiing on our local backcountry 14er looked painfully upon barren Pikes Peak. After a glimpse of spring in early March that had me excited for warm days of climbing, the snow and rain hit hard. From the end of March through most of May the Front Range went from a drought to above average levels of precipitation.

Long after I had decided that it was time to pack away the skis for the summer, my roommate Josh, floated the idea of a ski day ‘the Peak’. After a few phone calls it was set, and I committed to the trip so long as the weather wasn’t more conducive to rock climbing. I woke up on May 15 to rain and really wanted to stay in bed. Josh told me there was enough new snow on Pikes Peak that the road was not currently open far enough for us to get any decent skiing. The ranger advised us that they were working on getting the road open to the summit and it was currently sunny with no wind. Skeptically I continued to get my things together hoping for any news that would let me return to my pillow.

One thing you should know about my friends and me is we don’t do things halfway. So I hit the road to grab the pop-up tent, table, grill, cooler and a host of bar-be-que supplies. The burgers were made, the beer was cold, and thank God the ranger was right. After driving through clouds we hit 10,000 ft. and saw the sun for the first time that day. With palpable excitement we set up camp in no time,

piled in the pick-up, picked up some fellow skiing hitch-hikers, and headed upwards. Although there is an old ski area with a few runs cut into the trees that can be accessed from the road, we spent our day riding what most people consider to be the better terrain.

Glen Cove offers something for everyone. There is a nice run that is easy to reach less than 50 yards downhill from a pull-off on the side of the toll road. There is also more technical terrain to descend, like the W’s, and wider shoots like Little Italy, which offer a nice mix of open terrain and narrow shoots. It allows you plenty of area to turn out of the fall line but is still reasonably steep with enough consequences to

keep your attention.

It was the kind of day that keeps the smiles coming and makes for great ‘you missed it’ talk at the bar later. I can’t say enough about the snow. True hero snow. It was soft enough to let your edges dig in, but firm enough to let you rip. That day in May we were all better skiers. The endless number of tourists made us feel like better skiers as well. Questions like “are you going to ski that?” poured out of car windows. And the people forced to pull over with overheated brakes near to our base camp further reassured us of our awesomeness.



Making turns on Pikes Peak

After a handful of runs we broke for lunch. Unbelievably the majority of the conversation that day wasn’t about how great the snow was. It was about how we still could not believe the weather. From the top of Glen Cove to our base camp at the bottom, the usually visible Colorado Springs was amazingly obscured -- buried under thick clouds. Our smiles grew as we donned some more sunscreen and thought of all of our friends stuck in the rain. In town it was the kind of day you could only enjoy if you were miserably hungover. It was dreary and you wouldn’t feel bad about staying at home and watching ski movies all day. We were living it.

Since that day in May, Pike’s Peak has gotten more snow and I can happily report that my skis are still out and ready to hit ‘the Peak’ again. Just waiting for another rainy day... At least for those who stay in town.



Above the rain that tortures the city of Colorado Springs



Provenance of Books

Sue Sanders

A week before my dad left for Turkey, he'd finished packing. Clothes, toothbrush, iPod, Kindle -- everything for his three-week trip fit in a small, carry-on bag. "I've loaded ten books on my Kindle," he added excitedly. I can understand his enthusiasm for e-books -- the ability to carry as much reading material as you need in a 10-ounce plastic package -- but are we losing one of the travel's delights: finding used books?

For me, long trips mean long books, and lots of them. Since traveling inevitably involves chunks of time spent on planes, ships, trains and buses, bringing books along is as necessary as packing my passport. One of the first things I do when I arrive in a new town, after checking into a guesthouse and getting rid of my luggage, is to find the local used bookstore, trade what I've read and dig up another book for my trip's next chapter. It's a game of pure chance -- I never know what I'll find. Occasionally my luck can fail miserably (like when I once got stuck with a Sidney Sheldon book), but I usually discover something good, and it's often a title I wouldn't have thought to choose on my own. Sometimes, I'll trade books with other travelers (I often judge a traveler by their book's cover). Seeing what someone else is reading is a great conversation starter -- and it's been a nice way to kickstart friendships and collect travel advice.

Once in a while I'll come across a book that practically begs for me to take it home. So it'll bump around whatever country I'm visiting, taking up precious space in my backpack until, back in New York, I'll stash it on my shelf and forget about it. Recently, I pulled down one book I got on a trip I'd taken almost two decades ago, and flipped it open. I was suddenly transported not just back to Indone-

sia, but also back in time -- I'm in my late twenties again, in a wood and thatch hut at Lake Toba, Sumatra with both the islands and future in front of me, before so much life happened: marriage, mental illness, baby, cancer, divorce, falling in love again.

Inside the book "12500 rupiah" is scribbled on the cover page, under a stamp for "Bookshop and Handicrafts." (Second-hand bookstores diversify.) Another price, in Thai baht, is jotted above. At the time I picked up this book, I'd only been on my trip a month and it was clear my book had already experienced more of Southeast Asia than I had. It had its own provenance, a line of travelers in Southeast Asia, reading, trading, selling it like a talisman. When I pick it up now, I've got to treat it gingerly -- the spine is injured, a few pages are loose -- it's clear the book has seen better days. I close my eyes and see, not better days, but earlier, different ones. I catch a glimpse of a mother orangutan holding her baby close, I feel rich red mud squish under my hiking boots, and I taste dark Sumatran coffee served in a tall clear glass -- the freshest I've ever had. My eyes burn again from the clove cigarette smoke in the crowded bus to Medan, and I feel queasy from trying to read the book as the bus bumps along dirt roads before it hits the highway that's as smooth as Barry White's voice. Would all those memories hover so close to the surface if I'd read the book on a Kindle or a Nook? I don't know. Electronic books, like so much of electronic world, may make things easier but they also steal something fundamental from the travel experience. Proust had his madeline. I've got my used books. E-books are ephemeral books: hit delete and they're gone. Will the memories vanish as quickly, too?

Post-Climb Swimming Holes

There are few things that top off a day of climbing properly: cold beer, red meat seared on a hot grill, and plunging into fresh cool water. For the latter there are a few places are gaining popularity thanks to the facility of the Google search: Paradise Cove in Colorado, Mill Creek in UT and Split Rock in NY. We'll save you the trouble.



Mill Creek, UT

Mill Creek is a short hike to a nice pool with some shorter cliff diving, making it a popular destination. If you're truly adventurous, treat yourself and hike further up the canyon to another pool. It does not have the sheer cliffs of the lower pool, but it is much more secluded. If you climb up the small waterfall at the end of the pool you can walk around to a small natural water slide. The waterfall is the destination for most, but continuing up canyon provides a nice hike in a beautiful setting.

Climbing areas nearby:

All the awesomeness near Moab.

Getting there:

From downtown Moab, head east on Center Street, turn right on 400 E, then left on Mill Creek Dr. Follow Mill Creek Dr. when it bears right at Sand Flats Rd. Finally, left on Powerhouse Lane until it ends at a dirt parking area. From the pullout you will see the trail heading east on the south (right) side of the stream. Less than 5 minutes from the car is a sandstone gorge below a small dam that provides a great place to hangout a short distance from the car.

For the more adventurous, continue heading up canyon, staying on the well-used trail. The trail crosses the stream a few times, so don't be afraid to get your feet wet right from the start.



Paradise Cove, CO

Paradise cove used to be a word-of-mouth, locals-only hangout. Today it's much easier to find this retreat, thanks to blabby writers like us. Here you'll find sheer rock leading down to a very respectable pool. The pool is deep enough that only the truly brave touch bottom, and the water is free of obstacles. There is something for everyone -- from the tame 16 foot jump to the crazy 100 footer. There are also plenty of sun-soaked rocks to warm up on. Year round the water is brisk at best. Best visited on really hot days.

Climbing areas nearby:

Eleven Mile Canyon.
Everything else in the South Platte

Getting there:

From Colorado Springs, drive west on U.S. Highway 24 for 26 mi. About a mile past Divide, turn left onto Twin Rocks Road. Drive 5.8 miles until the road dead ends at Teller County Road 1. Turn left and drive 5.9 miles to a fork in the road. Veer right on Teller County Road 11 and continue 4 miles until the road dead ends. Turn right onto Teller County Road 112. Drive 2.7 miles to a dirt parking lot on the left at the top of a small rise. The trail to the cove starts across the road. Follow a clear a half a mile to the pool.



Photo: Kate Galecki

Split Rock, NY

The Mohonk Preserve outside New Paltz, NY is a climbing mecca. Home of the 'Gunks', the Mohonk preserve attracts thousands of climbers from around the world each year. However, during the summer, the heat and humidity can be nothing short of brutal. A dip in Split Rock can be more than just a welcome relief. Although Split Rock may not be the biggest secret, there are many places to swim in and around the preserve but Split Rock is not only the most secluded and serene but also contains the coolest water.

Climbing areas nearby:

The Gunks

Getting there:

From New Paltz head west on Co Rd. 299 until it dead ends. Make a left onto Hwy. 44 for about 1.5 mi. Go under the small bridge and follow the road to the bottom of the hill and look for the parking area on the right. From the parking lot head south on the trail to the Trapps and make the first left. In a few hundred yards find your refreshing oasis. You are required to have a preserve permit to use the area but if you show up early enough you may sneak by before the ranger station is staffed. Obviously, reverse the direction if you are coming right off the crag.



Sabaidee Pi Mai -- Celebrating The New Year The Laos Way

by Angie Orth

With its sleepy, sedated reputation, I expected my recent journey around The Lao People's Democratic Republic to be a gentle wander through Asia the way it used to be before high rises and KFCs took the place of indigenous hill tribes and wild elephants. Only once I joined up with Stray Travel Asia did I learn my trip dates fell during the one time of year where Laos is not so languid – the annual Water Festival.

Laos, Burma, Cambodia and Yunnan, China each celebrate the season in their own way during the second week of April, but it's usually Songkran in Thailand that attracts the most attention and subsequent splashy (pun intended) photos in Western travel sections. I'd heard conflicting reports about the Pi Mai Laos festivities. Was it a milder, gentler version of Songkran or a

celebration worthy of its own story? I set out to see for myself.

The Water Festival commemorates the sun beginning its journey north and traditionally is marked with cultural performances and religious ceremonies. Homes, temples and images of Buddha are given a good scrubbing in a countrywide spring-cleaning event. The revered act of watering came from the tale of King Kabinlaphom, who lost his head

in a wager with an advisor. After decapitation, the seven princesses kept his head in a cave, visiting once a year to sprinkle it with holy water in the hopes of bringing prosperity and good weather to the land. Today, it's customary for elders and monks to receive gentle sprinkles of flowered or perfumed water during the holiday to signify renewal and reverence. Once tradition is satisfied, the Water Festival becomes the wildest, wettest party of the year. This is great news for the non-monk because now tradition has evolved so even "falangs" can join in.

Touring with Stray Asia

Traveling in the region is tricky in April, as trains and buses sell out quickly and accommodations can cost almost double. As a first time visitor, I wanted someone else to help me sort out the details so I chose to meet up with Stray Travel Asia, a hop-on, hop-off tour of Thailand and Laos with several predetermined tracks. I picked the Tom Yum pass, beginning in Bangkok, taking a train to historic Sukhothai and Chiang Mai, and snaking around north and central Laos via bus before a final night in the capital of Vientiane. Known for small groups and a very laid back vibe, Stray Travel Asia manages the transportation aspects of the experience – buses, trains, tuk-tuks, slow boats – and helps to book into (dirt cheap but nice) guest houses at each stop. The rest is really up to the individual. While I traveled straight through on the Tom Yum itinerary as scheduled, I met several folks who stopped for a few days or a week based on whims. It all depends how much time you have.

Since the trains to the north were booked up, our initial group of three (guide Anna and fellow traveler Amber) instead took public buses on the way to meet the big saffron-hued Stray bus across the Thailand/Laos border. After a fast bike trip around the sprawling historical park and the night market in sleepy Sukhothai, we made our way to



Countryside of Laos

the capital of Songkran, the ancient city of Chiang Mai. There’s plenty to entertain there, like the walled old town, dozens of wats, elephant parks and a famous night safari, not to mention a happening backpacker nightlife. This particular week though, everyone was in town for one reason – to get soaking wet at Songkran. Each stall at the night market offered half a dozen varieties of water guns; it seemed everyone was preparing for the Water Festival.

The Tom Yum pass allows for two nights in Chiang Mai, so we were able to sample a bit of Songkran before moving on to Laos. Our first run-in with water was after a relaxing Thai massage. Afterward, we found ourselves trapped inside the spa when a troupe of elementary school-aged kids set up a bunker just outside the door. Though we were able to divert the kids long enough to run screaming down the street and escape a soaking, a little old lady with a hose and a handful of American guys did us in on the way back to the guesthouse anyway.

Getting to know Laos

We escaped Chiang Mai just in time to avoid a complete drenching and made our way to the border, spending a gecko-enhanced night in Chiang Khong, Thailand, before crossing the Mekong and clearing customs in Laos. It was there we met our Stray bus and local guide, Mr. Pon, and began the scenic drive through the Bokeo Province to celebrate the Water Festival in dusty Luang Namtha.

Luang Namtha is one of the best places to begin a true Laos trek and many travelers stop here to acquire a guide and head into the jungle. With so much Water Festival activity in town however, we spent the day dodging scattered pockets of kids and teens with water guns and garbage cans full of water, intent on saturating the newest ‘falangs’ in town. A fierce gang of water gun-wielding toddlers attempted to break into our guesthouse room once they saw we were dry and safe on the inside; luckily, they were unsuccessful in their attempts. We managed to stay quite dry in Luang Namtha, but only due to strategic street crossing and a lot of fast running. In the evening once the random street soakings ended, we sampled phenomenal grilled duck and mango fruit shakes at the market, followed by a bewildering visit to Luang Namtha’s famous Chinese disco for Beerlaos and some bizarre dance moves with the locals.

A word to the wise: don’t drink too much



Laotian kids prepare for the party of the year

Beerlaos at the Chinese disco, because the next day’s bus journey through Oudomxai is like riding the Magic Kingdom’s Thunder Mountain roller coaster for six hours. Though scenic, the ride is not fun even if you don’t suffer from motion sickness; if you do, bring a bucket. Fortunately for the nauseous, we stopped about halfway to get lunch and de-nauseate. But instead of searching out grub, we spent our time locating the best water guns in order to be prepared for our arrival in Nong Khiaw. Little did we know we’d be soaked (and really hungry) long before we made it to the next stop.

As we drove along the rough mountainous roads, smatterings of Laos villagers would appear around the corner, prepared with Water Festival weaponry – guns, hoses, cups, buckets – and thwack! They’d splat our bus, which wasn’t a huge issue so long as we kept the windows closed. Once we had our own water guns however, we turned into a moving four-man war machine, hanging out of the moving bus’ open windows with our guns, spraying giggling children and screaming “Sabaidee Pi Mai!” like vikings on the rampage. Though it means a friendly “Happy Laos New Year,” our vigorous and earnest shouts sounded a bit more like “You’re going to die!” and certainly startled a villager or two along the way.

We drove through a larger village a few hours later, hollering and shooting like modern day pirates, when the bus stopped and Mr. Pon abruptly told us to get out. He and the driver were taking a break, right in

the middle of the village. That would’ve been good to know before we soaked everyone along the road on the way in! As we got off the bus, dozens upon dozens of children with cups and buckets encroached and immediately war broke out. It wasn’t a fair fight; there were four of us and at least 50 kids. Ladies in the market roared with laughter as the youngsters splashed us again and again; the sleepy village erupted with activity and I’m sure they’ll remember the random epic falang fight for years to come.

Between the windy mountain bus ride and the village water war, we looked like we’d been through the spin cycle by the time we arrived at our rustic bungalows in dreamy Nong Khiaw, home to the sleepy Ou River, imposing limestone cliffs and Phathok Cave, where North Vietnamese sympathizers hid during the US bombing of Laos in the 1960’s. Water Festival activity was at a minimum here, so we finally had time to dry off, grab a great meal and play Petanque (a game that remained even after the French ended their occupation) with the locals before crashing hard in our sparse hillside shacks.

In the morning, we moseyed down the hill to board a slow boat for a lazy, beautiful six hour cruise up the Ou River to historic Luang Prabang. Rugged and secluded, the ride afforded a view of rural riverside Laos, highlighting the subsistence livelihood of many Laos people. After a brief stop at the Pak Ou caves where the Ou and the Mekong converge, we made our way to Luang

Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the most romantic locations in all of Laos. Laos has been occupied by everyone from the Japanese to the French, so the myriad of influences at play in the cultural fabric can be seen in monasteries, Buddhist temples and French colonial architecture.

The Party of The Year

Although technically the Water Festival only lasts a few days, in many towns the party (and the soakings) lasts for a whole week. Since temperatures can reach more than 100 degrees during the hot dry season, no one really minds the constant dousing in cold water, but as we learned in Luang Prabang, Laotians have added to the arsenal of liquids to chuck at passersby. We were told to expect shaving cream, baby powder, paint and even motor oil, and did we ever get it.

Upon arrival, we found that due to the festivities, the Stray bus couldn’t get into the center of town to bring our luggage or our water guns. We’d have to manage with what we had on. It wasn’t hard to procure buckets, cups and a free hose from our guest house, so within moments of checking in, Anna, Amber, Franz and I were in the street whooping it up, soaking passing motorbikes and tuk-tuks like the locals did and beginning to experience the euphoria of the Water Festival.

We ran around Luang Prabang for hours, from hose to hose and bucket to bucket, dousing others and being doused in return, making new friends, dancing to Justin Bieber and Beyonce with groups of raucous teens and seeing the wild side of a normally conservative, quiet society. Only monks are exempt from soaking; I saw people dump freezing buckets of water on completely dry old ladies, tourists with all their luggage and even directly into cars onto drivers who forgot to lock the doors. If you dare show up in Laos the second week of April, accept that you’ll be wet the whole time. And not just wet. I was alternately covered in green, red and blue paint, followed by motor oil, topped off with a splash of baby powder for good measure. There’s no looking pretty on this day.

Later on at dinner, once we’d scrubbed off the paint and oil, we all agreed that our day celebrating the Water Festival in Luang Prabang was one of the most fun days any of

us had ever had in our entire lives.

Early in the morning before the revelers were again roused for more splashing, the monks passed by in their Stray Bus-orange robes and we departed for Vang Vieng, another riverside town in the throes of celebrating the Water Festival. While the scene here is normally filled with rowdy Westerners

By all accounts, Laos is still considered “off the beaten path”

tubing from bank-side bar to bar, today was off the rowdy Richter scale as the locals joined in to crowd the shallow river and party the day away. There were thousands of people, Western and Laos, mingling, eating, dancing, drinking and singing, all while completely and utterly soaking wet from head to toe. Again, we met new friends, laughed at the silliest folks, splashed little kids and soaked up the gorgeous scenery around us.

Whether or not my journey through Laos displayed the true character of the country, I can’t say. For 51 other weeks out of the year, a trip to Laos would be a lazy jaunt filled with breathtaking scenery and gentle, peaceful people. For that one unusual



Do bring a waterproof camera

week though, I felt like a kid instead of a traveler. Nothing else mattered but filling up my bucket and finding someone who really needed a good splash in the face.

Tips for visiting SE Asia during New Year

There’s no way around it, you’re going to get soaked. Pack plastic bags to house

anything you don’t want to get wet.

Bring a waterproof camera. You don’t want to forget the watergun fights with village kids or the huge day-long celebrations in towns like Luang Prabang, but you just might if you can’t take any photos.

Dress conservatively. Despite the wild atmosphere during the Water Festival, Laos is no place to be parading around in a bikini and short shorts. Cover up in light fabrics that will dry easily.

By all accounts, Laos is still considered “off the beaten path,” offering everything from rugged mountains to lazy rivers to endless rice fields. Koh Phi Phi was once undiscovered, too, and I suspect it won’t be long before franchise restaurants and hotels spring up here like they have in other Southeast Asia hotspots. Laos is still an ideal destination to stretch the budget for a few weeks, costing around \$30-40 a day, and it certainly qualifies as a notch on the obscure country travel bedpost.

Visiting Laos
www.strayasia.com

Natural High

by Holly Miranda Smale

photos by Sam Pitt

When I was a very young child in England, there was a programme on television that granted wishes. It was run by a man called Jim, and children from around the country would write to him with their hopes and dreams and wait for him to sort them out: a kind of Santa Claus for experience, instead of presents. There was a little boy who got to drive James Bond’s car, and a child who got a part on Doctor Who; there was a young viewer who managed to temporarily become the third drummer in Adam and the Ants, and a class that got to eat lunch on a moving rollercoaster (or try).

I wrote to Jim every single month for three years, and eventually my mum said she wasn’t giving me any more stamps unless she knew where they were going.

“I’m writing to Jim,” I finally admitted.

“What have you asked him for?”

“To fly,” I said, showing her the letter. “Like Peter Pan. Or a bird.”

There was a pause. “Umm,” mum said eventually, “Sweetheart, that’s quite a tall order.”

“No it’s not,” I told her firmly, because I’d thought about it a great deal and it seemed perfectly feasible. “Peter Pan can do it. So I can as well.”

“Well... Will you mind terribly if Jim attaches you to a string and swings you from the ceiling?”

I glared at her. “Peter Pan doesn’t have a string and he’s not attached to the ceiling.”

“What about if you go up in an aeroplane or a helicopter? Will that do?”

“No.”

“A hot air balloon?”

“No.”

“What about if I take you to the top of a tall building and then swing you around by your arms?”

“Mum,” I sighed, rolling my eyes at her. “This is why you’re not Jim, isn’t it.”

I waited and I waited, but Jim never wrote back. Because – my mum eventually told me, when I was a few years older – what I wanted was impossible. Not for small fictional children, obviously, but for real life people. Flying just wasn’t one of the privileges

granted humans, she said, and the sooner I came to grips with that fact the happier I’d be on the ground.

She was wrong, and I never adjusted to the disappointment of being land-based. Over the next twenty years, I tried it all. I tried the aeroplane and the helicopter, but it wasn’t like flying at all: it was like sitting in a moving room. I tried the hot air balloon, but that was like standing in a moving basket. I went up in a micro-light, and while it was definitely closer to the sky it was also noisy and jittery and felt like a machine. I got one of the local theatre companies to pull me around on a string, but – as I had suspected at the age of five – that was very much like being pulled around on a string. And my dad had to stop swinging me around, because eventually his arms started hurting.

It was only on moving to Japan, however, that I finally got the wish that Jim hadn’t been able to grant me. It was only in Japan that I found paragliding.

In the world, there are dozens of perfect paragliding spots. You can paraglide over the Himalayas in Nepal and the Dolomites in Italy; you can hoist yourself over Table Mountain in Cape Town and Coronet Peak in New Zealand and the Swiss Alps; over the rainforest in Brazil and from fairytale castles in Europe. You can fly over the plains of Africa, or in India, or Korea, or Pakistan, or France; from Pakistan or Canada or the UK. Basically, if there’s a hill and a view you will find a nearby paragliding school.

In Japan, there is nowhere better to paraglide than Mount Fuji. It’s not just because it’s the legend-riddled symbol of the nation, beloved by poets and artists for thousands of years, or the fact that it’s a near perfect volcano: almost perfectly symmetrical and at the right time of year topped with snow like the cream on a Japanese shaved ice “Kakigori”. It’s not just because it’s beautiful, or the biggest mountain in the country, or an internationally recognizable view. It’s not just because there are paragliding companies spread around the base of it so you can take your pick, or because the distinct four seasons in Japan mean that no flight is ever the same: blossoms in spring, red leaves in Autumn, a haze of white heat in summer and a blanket of snow in the winter.

No: it’s also because if you fly in front of it, you don’t have to climb it too. That was my reasoning, anyway.

Unfortunately, the infamously mysterious Fuji disappears completely at the slightest hint of fog or cloud, and so the rainy morning of my first ever flight was spent sitting in a room, with an inexplicable box of newborn puppies, waiting nervously to see if the sky would clear enough for us to leave the building. The paragliding company I flew with – WingKiss – is based on the Asigiri plateau, on the



South East of Fuji in Fujinomiya, Shizuoka prefecture, and the building was packed full of semi-professionals and professionals waiting to get into the sky, with myself and my friend as the only two terrified first-timers. And, frankly, the confidence we’d had that morning had started to subside about four hours into sitting in a room, watching videos of people jumping off mountains with nothing but large nylon blankets harnessed to their bottoms. “Such a shame it’s bad weather,” we’d ended up muttering to the floor. “We might have to do it another day. Like tomorrow. Or next week. Or, you know, when we’re much older and closer to dying anyway.”

The school – like most schools – offers courses that teach you how to fly on your own. There are any number of combination packages, ranging in experience and time and aptitude and cost, but we had taken none of them. For the first flight, we’d opted for the tandem jump where no experience or knowledge is required. We would simply be hoisted onto the front of a tandem glider with a professional flier and then left to hyperventilate our way down to the ground again with no responsibility whatsoever for our own safety. Easy. And the brief video training required was especially brief for me, because I don’t speak Japanese. So, I had simply watched with round eyes, nodding occasionally and hoping that I wasn’t being told anything I’d be expected to know at any stage in the future.

Just after lunchtime the sun came out and the skies abruptly cleared – as skies in Shizuoka often do – and what was left of the nervous wrecks that used to be my friend and I were piled into a bus and driven to the top of the nearby mountain, Kono Azuma. At an altitude of 1,050 metres, this looked much bigger when I knew we were jumping off it. Before, it had looked quite little. Now, it looked like Everest.

On the top of the mountain facing Fuji was a large, flat, blue tarpaulin area, slanted downwards towards a sheer drop: like an extreme sort of picnic blanket. When the bus stopped and shaky legs were swung out of the sliding doors, I held my hand up.

“I’m sorry,” I told them, “but I’ve just realized that I can’t jump off a mountain. I’m game for flying, but I’m not game for jumping off mountains. They’re two very different things.”

“Don’t worry,” they said, handing me a helmet. “You’re going with an English speaker. That way she can tell you if there’s a problem.”

“Problem?” I squeaked, before being pushed gently over to a very tiny Japanese lady who grinned at how pale my face had gone. “What do you mean problem?” And then I looked at my tandem partner: the woman who would be controlling my life for the next thirty five minutes. She looked younger than me, and half my size. I’d been hoping for a six foot five mass of sheer fat and muscle to break my fall if

I needed it.

“Don’t worry,” she said, hooking the parachute on to us and slipping me into the holster. “It’ll be fun.”

“Uh,” I replied, unconvinced, and suddenly I wasn’t so sure about being Peter Pan after all. It was suddenly too real, and too clear that there was absolutely nothing separating me from the air or the ground: nothing but a few bits of material under my bottom resembling a big crotchless rope nappy and a large bit of material over my head that looked like hi-tech bedding. No floor, no metal, no seat. No large basket to walk around in. No in-flight films or speaker systems to tell me about turbulence. No ceiling, and definitely no string. Just me, a stranger, a few bits of material, a very big mountain and a whole lot of sky.

I looked anxiously at the cliff edge.

“Now,” she said, “when I say run, run. And when I say lift, lift.” She started walking forwards.

“Now?” I squeaked. I had thought we’d be given a few hours of motivational speeches first. “You want me to run at nothing?” I clarified.

“Yes.”

“I don’t think I can,” I explained. “I can’t really run when there’s earth on the other end of it.”

“Sure you can,” she said from behind me. “Now run!”

And I ran.

I ran the only way you can run towards the edge of a mountain edge when every single natural instinct in your body is telling you

not to: muttering swear words under my breath.

“And lift!” she shouted from behind me.

I swore again and lifted my legs. And the ground abruptly disappeared.

Suddenly, it was silent. The only sound was me – no longer swearing but taking large, shuddering breaths as I watched my feet float 1,000 metres above the ground – and the wind around us and on top of us and underneath us. We had been abruptly suspended in the air, the way eagles hang looking for prey: not falling, as every part of my unconscious brain expected to be, but flying. The thin harness underneath our bottoms and the sheet above our heads seemed to become part of us and as natural as wings: to almost disappear completely. And as the parachute swayed gently to the left and the right, my breathing grew steadier and deeper and the sky grew strangely bigger.

Around us, the farming lands of Asigiri stretched: green and brown and patchworked and tiny. Below us, a dark green pine forest lined the mountain. To the side, my friend waved from his parachute: presumably no longer swearing under his breath either. And in front, looming perfect and clear and huge, was Mount Fuji. With its snow cap hanging in the air above the blueish cone like some kind of lid you could pop off. The view of a million postcards, and a million calendars, and a million paintings. And much, much better than any of them.

I took another shuddering breath. After nearly thirty years, I was finally flying. And it was exactly the way I thought it would be.



In the distance Mt. Fuji dwarfs paragliders

“Like it?” my tandem partner said after ten minutes of watching the sky open up and my feet dangle into nothing.

“No,” I said, still trembling. “I love it.”

“Want to spin?” she asked.

“Umm,” I said, and suddenly the sky disappeared. And we span: in spirals that looped us like an invisible rollercoaster while I shouted until my throat hurt.

“Okay!” I finally managed to yell. “Enough spinning!”

She laughed. “That’s my favourite bit.”

Thirty-five minutes in the air, and it was the longest thirty-five minutes of my life and also the shortest. Every minute felt different, and every minute I noticed something else. Birds were flying below us, and planes were above us: for the first time, I was airborne and squigged in between. Now that the sky had cleared paragliders were appearing by the minute, and the sky was filling with tiny puffs of neon sheets, like bright pollen. The air smelt of the pine trees and the grasslands underneath us. And never before had the adrenalin of an extreme sport combined with such a sensation of peace: the heart-pounding, hand trembling, mind sharpening excitement of knowing you’re hanging 1,000 feet above the ground mixed with the dreamy, calm, surreal experience of floating. Never before had something so unnatural felt so organic. Never had something so dangerous seemed so safe. And while it wasn’t flying the way Superman flew – zooming through the air – it was flying the way Peter Pan flew when he hung in the air and waited for Wendy to catch up. Without a motor, and without metal. Just me and the sky. And that was what I had wanted as a five-year-old. Not to zoom, but to be suspended

As we reluctantly descended, I asked how long we could have stayed up there if I wasn’t paying for a thirty-five minute session.

“As long as the wind lasts,” my tandem partner said. “All day, sometimes. I usually bring a sandwich.” Then she laughed. “Now,” she said as the landing field got closer, “when I say run, run. And keep your legs bent.”

“There’s a whole lot of running involved in flying, isn’t there,” I grumbled, and prepared my legs to run into nothing again. And as we watched the ground approach, I realized that I wanted to cry. It had taken me so long to get into the air, and it seemed so unfair that I had to come back down again so soon. I wanted to stay up there all day too.

“Now,” she told me as the ground approached, “run.”

And I ran until the ground caught up with me, at which point I promptly fell over. All the grace and peace I had found in the sky immediately abandoned me, because I was land-based all over again. And I really didn’t want to be.

“Was everything okay?” my friend asked as we de-parachuted and de-helmeted and I did a few little jumps of happiness; partly to celebrate, and partly to get back in the air.

“Amazing,” I told him.

“I saw you spinning and thought something had gone wrong.”

“Nope. Apparently she just likes doing it.”

“You know,” one of the other parachuters told me: “of all of us, you won the jackpot. You know that girl you just came down with? Your tandem instructor?”

“Yeah?” I looked at the tiny girl behind me with flushed cheeks and the big grin: the one who had controlled my life – and whether

I would continue having one – for thirty-five minutes. The one who wasn’t a six-foot-five lump of muscle and fat, and hadn’t had to be.

“She’s a world champion paraglider, just back from the Olympics in Italy. She helps out here for fun. You just had the experience of a lifetime.”

I looked at her again, and then I thought about it for a few seconds. “I know,” I said eventually. Because I already did.

As we drove away from the site, I looked back at the sky where dozens of tiny paragliders were hanging: dots of colour against the blue. They didn’t look like planes, I realized, or helicopters, or micro-lights. They didn’t look like they were on strings, or hot air-balloons, or any man-made type of flying. They looked like birds of prey, hanging in the sky and sitting in the wind. And they looked exactly like Peter Pan and a hundred Lost Boys, just after they had flown out of the window.

The letters I wrote may not have gone to the right place, but they worked in the end. Twenty years later I gotten to fly, just as I was sure I could. And eventually I’ll take enough flights that I’m allowed to go on my own. Because that’s how Peter Pan flew too: all by himself.

Most of us want to fly as children, and sometimes as we get older we begin to believe it’s impossible. As Wendy asked when she was little, “Why can’t you fly, mother?” And as her mother answered: “Because I am grown-up, dearest. When people grow up they forget the way.”

There aren’t many wishes we make as children that we can grant ourselves as adults, and there are too many dreams we put away unfulfilled.

With paragliding, even the most land-tied adults can remember how to fly all over again.

Paragliding Companies on the Asagiri Plateau, Japan:

Wingkiss
www12.plala.or.jp/wingkiss
Tel – 0544-52-1090

Asagiri Kugon Paragliding Company
www.asagiri-para.com
Tel – 0544-52-1031

Sky-Asagiri Paragliding
www.skyasa.com
Tel – 0544-52-0304



The moon rises over Mt. Fuji

