

CARLOS GRIDER

THE TRAILS

A COMPLETE INTRODUCTION
TO BACKPACKING AROUND THE WORLD



THE TRAILS: A GUIDE TO BACKPACKING THE WORLD



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THE TRAILS: A GUIDE TO BACKPACKING THE WORLD

Since the 1970s, travelers and backpackers have used guidebooks, like Lonely Planet and Frommers, as their maps and mentors for exploring the world – filled with itineraries, cities, histories, and stories that incited backpacking around the globe and dictated the most popular destinations.



But the world has changed much since the 1970s. So has backpacking.

Wandering across the world while living out of a backpack has been influenced and polished by a few trends:

- Newer, more comfortable hostels offer all of the knowledge, hosting, and traveler introductions, while still being a cheap yet comfortable place to sleep.
- A rise in "gap year travel" by college kids, "mini-retirements" by mid-career professionals between jobs, and digital nomads living the dream of remote working from paradise
- Connected travel wherein travelers are connected continuously to information/suggestions about destinations, and other travelers creating a constant stream of "word of mouth" travel information

But the most influential new aspect of travel is "The Trails."



"The Trails" are a set of well-trodden itineraries in each region of the world: South East Asia, South America, the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central America

Each backpacking trail delivers the highlights of the respective region through rich travel experiences made easy with straightforward logistics for accommodation, transit, sightseeing, and more. Even more, the trails are filled with like-minded travelers to share the experience with.

Whether you have two weeks, two months, or two years to wander, "The Trails" will guide you through the best the world has to offer, on a budget, easily navigated, and surrounding you with great company.

The Banana Pancake Trail (Southeast Asia), the Gringo Trail (South America), the Balkan Walk, The Arabian Trail (The Middle East), and the Maya Trail (Central America).

These are the "Trails" of travel.

Now let's find the right "Trail" for you.



MY FIRST EXPERIENCE ON THE "BACKPACKING TRAILS"

Argentina unguided and the Balkan Blitz

My own experience with the Trails of Backpacking happened by accident during my very first backpacking adventure abroad, to Argentina, and then seven years later with a friend wandering through the Balkans hitting five countries in 7 days.

ALONE IN ARGENTINA: AN UNEXPECTED YET MEMORABLE ADVENTURE

Back in 2011, during a "mini-retirement" between jobs, I bought a ticket for a three month trip to my dream destination – Argentina. Immediately before my flight, on the *exact* same day, I bought a Lonely Planet guide to South America.



My goal was to just learn and plan my travel along the way – if only I had known how *real* that goal would become! I would read the guide as I saw fit, planning my destinations a couple of weeks in advance. I read the Argentina portion of the guide lightly and planned just enough of the Buenos Aires leg to get me through the next week. I found a fun hostel (in the guidebook), wrote down the address, and noted a few sights to see in my first few days. Then I forgot my travel guide on the plane!

I didn't realize my guidebook was missing until I arrived at my hostel, so there was no hope of reclaiming it. At the time, it was virtually impossible to find a travel guidebook for South America in English. I didn't have an international sim card either, so Googling along the way wasn't an option either. My only hope of learning where to travel was option 1) lots of research on my computer on the wifi in the hostel or 2) talk to people.

I chose option 2. I struck up conversations in the hostel and simply asked, "Soooo...I have no idea what to do today. What should I do?"

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That accident (losing my guidebook) and that choice (choosing to ask other travelers *on the road* for their recommendations) changed my travels to come in a way I never would have expected – and in a way that outdated guidebooks never truly capture.

I went from knowing nothing about Argentina and Buenos Aires to wandering the wine country of Mendoza with other travelers by back, trekking through Patagonia with new friends, falling into heated soccer games, and being adopted by travelers. After 3 months, I'd seen every notable sight in Argentina and experienced every spot to its fullest. No guidebook necessary.



What's even funnier is that along the way during my unstructured itinerary on the trail, I ran into travelers that I'd met at hostels and on walking tours in Buenos Aires, thousands of miles and months later in Patagonia at the end of the world. We were all on the same trail, sharing the same highlights and the same adventures. And every single one of our experiences on that portion of the "Gringo Trail. All unique. All our own. All unguided. All shared. All we needed.

Therein lies the beauty of "The Trails." You just need to go. Once you reach the first city of the trail (or any city on the trail), the momentum of travel and travelers will guide you to the next "quintessential" destination, without a travel agent, a guidebook, or even a clue. It's beautiful. But we'll dig deeper into how the trails work a little later.

But, let's be honest, one success doesn't validate a great idea, does it?

Let's err on the side of caution and say...no. Instead, I'll share a vaguely similar experience from 8 years later.

BLASTING THROUGH THE BALKANS WITH NO ITINERARY: 4 COUNTRIES IN 7 DAYS

During a "mini-retirement" I took traveling the Banana Pancake Trail through Southeast Asia, I met a group of travelers who would become some of my closest friends – and who I still connect with to this day.

A couple of years after that experience, I was still on the road traveling the world. At the time, I was [volunteering in a refugee camp in Greece](#) when one of the "Sons of Pai" (as we called ourselves) reached out.

He had one week, and he would meet me anywhere in the world.

Of all the options for destinations to travel to, the Balkans resonated with him the most.

Done.

But what did he want to do? Hike? Eat? Swim? Party? Sightsee?

His answer: Everything.

At the time, I'd never visited the Balkans and had no idea where we should go or what we should do.

He had no problem with this. We agreed we'd figure it out along the way. We both bought our flights into Croatia and agreed to go wherever the Balkans took us.

The Balkans had us now.

One week. No reservations.



When he arrived, I met him at the bus stop from the airport, we went to our hostel, checked in, asked the staff & travelers in the lounge where we should go next (the following day), booked our bus, then proceeded to enjoy our day on the town. We returned to our hostel, knackered, went to sleep, woke up, departed for and arrived in our next city, asked the travelers and staff in the lounge where we should go next, booked our follow-on bus which we took the next day – repeating the process.

That week of travel was the most potent I've ever experienced, hitting the highlights of the Balkans at lightning speed.

Croatia to Montenegro. Montenegro to Serbia. Serbia to Bosnia. Bosnia to Croatia.

We explored the castles of Game of Thrones. We road a boat tour between the fjords of Montenegro and trekked to towering views. We slept on the beach. We explored the Rakja scene of Belgrade. We partied till sunup on a private island. We captained our own boat between the islands of Croatia.

And this was all in 7 days. Thanks to “the Trails”.

Now, if the trails can transform a seven-day trip into an adventure like this, what can they do for your two weeks a year? And how?

HOW DO "THE TRAILS" WORK?

These mysterious "backpacker trails" are so intriguing because, though we can clearly see they exist via itineraries on the internet, you might never know how potent they are with comfort and how much "travel momentum" these trails provide you with until you experience them. Great hostels, plenty of traveler friends, easy transport between destinations, and the highlight sites of the world all exist in spades on these “backpacker trails.”

This momentum and well-trodden paths mean that all you need to do is arrive at one of the starting cities or significant cities on the trail, stay at a decent hostel (don't worry, it's ok to stay in a private room), and just wait for the magic to happen. Not too long into your stay, you'll hear the best experiences in your current city (and a few others), the best places to go next, and how to make it happen.



(The digs at Sandeman hostel in a converted wine cellar, with queen beds in Port wine barrels)

The staff might even point you to free walking tours, book your follow on accommodation for you, help you sort out shared transportation to your next destination (with other travelers...who you'll learn from as well), and so much more.

That process repeated, city after city, country after country, all of the way around the world is how I've experienced the best this world has to offer, without a guidebook, over two years of wandering.

My secret to fantastic travel.

The Trails.

Just go.

So we've talked about how amazing the trails are, let's talk about what the "Backpacking Trails" actually are.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRAILS

- **The Banana Pancake Trail: Southeast Asia**, starting in Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, or Hanoi
- **The Gringo Trail: South America**, starting in Buenos Aires, Santiago, or Bogota
- **The Balkan Walk: The Balkans**, starting in Dubrovnik or Split, Croatia
- **The Arabian Trail: The Middle East**, starting in Amman or Tel Aviv
- **The Maya Trail: Central America**, starting in Panama City

The trails can be thought of as a "conveyor belts for travelers" with infrastructure, assistance, good company, and experiences at every turn that naturally guide travelers through the best itinerary possible – without a guidebook.

Each "trail" covers a region of the world – Southeast Asia, South America, the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central America – delivering the highlights and rich experiences in a potent, efficient way.



(A brief break during a solo trek to Everest Base Camp)

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Plus, from a personal perspective, the ever-adapting nature of each trail and the personal experience (learning where to go and what to do from travelers and locals) adds a very genuine feel to the adventure.

Now, let's quickly review each trail. If nothing else, this section is *all* you need. If you arrive at the start point city (or one of the major cities) of your chosen trail with a decent

THE BANANA PANCAKE TRAIL

THE BEST OF SOUTHEAST ASIA & PERFECT INTRO FOR YOUNGER TRAVELERS



BEST FOR: Gap year travelers, college kids, budget travelers, water lovers

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Street food, tropical islands, parties, pub crawls, and [motorbike adventures](#)

BEST START POINTS: Bangkok, Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City

The "Banana Pancake Trail" is arguably the original backpacker trail and an especially great one to start on as a young traveler. Extremely cheap daily costs, rich experiences, a robust network of nice hostels, and easy transportation across the region (via ground and air) make Southeast Asia, and the Banana Pancake Trail, an excellent travel choice.

If you love the cuisine of Southeast Asia, combining fire, sweet, and spice, you will fall in love with the "street food" scene, which is half of the experience. From fried fish and noodles on the sidewalks of Bangkok to hearty dishes in Vietnam, to the otherworldly experience of the Tsukiji fish market, South East Asia is a mecca for foodies of all calibers. The Banana Pancake Trail will help you experience food in droves that you'll experience nowhere else in the world.



Beyond the street food and rich urban hives lies thousands of island paradises, a mere bus and boat ride away. From the raved about (and raving) Thai islands which tend to be touristy and party-filled, to the pristine waters of the Philippines with week-long liveaboard cruises between islands that have never seen foreigners, Southeast Asia is a mecca for beach and aquatic paradises. Freedivers and SCUBA divers will fall in love. For surfers (or aspiring surfers) Bali, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines deliver cheap places to learn and fantastic waves, wrapped in a backpacker experience.

For first-time travelers, exploring foodies, and water lovers, the Banana Pancake Trail and Southeast Asia will blow your mind.

MAJOR STOPS: Thailand -> Laos -> [Vietnam](#) -> Cambodia

WORTHWHILE ADDITIONS: [Sri Lanka](#), Myanmar, [Bali](#), [Nepal](#), [Philippines](#), Japan

THE GRINGO TRAIL

THE BEST OF SOUTH AMERICA, FILLED WITH ADVENTURE, AND PERFECT FOR LATE 20'S AND 30'S TRAVELERS



(A legendary view of a wonder of the world, Machu Picchu in Peru)

BEST FOR: “Career Gappers”, late 20’s and 30’s travelers, trekkers and outdoors lovers

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Latin passion expressed, trekking, wine, a gritty version of Europe

BEST START POINTS: Buenos Aires, Bogota, Santiago

For older travelers (in their late 20's and 30's) on mini-retirements, on sabbatical, and between jobs, South America's “Gringo Trail” delivers age and adventure appropriate backpacker experiences on a convenient loop.

South America is a *tad* more expensive than Southeast Asia’s Gringo Trail. Still, the Gringo Trail has some benefits that make it my favorite trail:

- South America delivers more easily accessible adventure experiences on dry land (camping and trekking through the Andes and Patagonia) than any other region of the world
- The region easily be navigated by learning a single language (Spanish)
- The experience of traveling South America caters to more western and European tastes with wine, steak, and plenty of delicious food that's closer to western palates but still delicious.

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One thing that does differentiate South America from Southeast Asia is how quickly and easily a traveler can assimilate into the local cultures. Though the cultures of South America are as different as countries in Europe, learning a handful of Spanish words is all you need to assimilate into life as a Latin local in South America.

In contrast, in traveling Southeast Asia – on the Banana Pancake Trail - you'll quickly find yourself a traveler family. Still, most travelers won't assimilate into the culture of their destination country as quickly as they might in South America. This opportunity to “blend in” with the locals makes South America travel a uniquely captivating experience.



(The bustling streets of a Buenos Aires street market, a gritty piece of Europe in Latin America)

Lastly, where Southeast Asia delivers thousands of tropical paradises with beachy experiences, South America is a mecca for mountain adventures. Whether through the legendary mountainous treks of Patagonia or rugged adventures through the Andes, for travelers that like to hike and camp, South America will embrace you with more adventure than you can experience in a lifetime.

A bonus of South America: wine.

While Napa Valley of California and the wine regions of Europe cost a small salary to experience, Chile and Argentina deliver world-class wineries to explore in true budget and backpacker style – by bus and bicycle amidst your larger adventures.

For the late 20's and 30's traveler with a few months to spare, there are few destinations and itineraries more worth your time than South America and the Gringo Trail.

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MAJOR STOPS: Argentina -> Uruguay -> Chile -> Bolivia -> Peru -> Ecuador -> Colombia

WORTHWHILE ADDITIONS: Brazil, Maya Trail, [Galapagos Islands](#)

THE BALKAN WALK

THE BEST OF THE BALKANS: THE CHEAPER, MORE ADVENTUROUS SIDE OF EUROPE



(A scene from Hvar, Croatia, and the boats that my friends and I captained for a day)

BEST FOR: Older and experienced travelers, history lovers, medieval castle lovers

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Castles, wine, neverending nightlife, beautiful beaches and boating, deep and tumultuous history

BEST START POINTS: Dubrovnik, Croatia

If you crave Europe, but your budget craves something cheaper, consider the Balkan Walk. The Balkan Walk is a loose trail that takes travelers through the best of these former Soviet States with the budget of eastern Europe and the cuisine and experience of western Europe.

Former Roman empires, well preserved medieval castles and cities, and local wines and hearty dishes sit around every corner.

With half of the Balkan countries sitting on the warm waters of the Adriatic sea and housing the southernmost Fjords in Europe, the Balkans hold incredible beach paradises in Europe as well kept secrets for budget travelers.

For lovers of history, remnants of the Roman Empire, the Soviet Union, and last centuries' wars make for a delightful and eye opening experience.



(Dubrovnik, Croatia)

For lovers of culture, experiencing a clashing of east meets west (Islamic and Christian), clashing of powers (western capitalism and Soviet Communism), and modernity (the pristineness of Croatia vs. the developing state of Albania) pack more than most would expect into a 1 to the 2-week itinerary.

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All of this happens against the backdrop of a slightly abrasive yet welcoming eastern European persona that offers the all-night partying and amazing views that more "unique" travelers would hope to find anywhere else in the world.

If you're on the hunt for a history and castle filled yet unique and cheap itinerary, consider the Balkan Walk.

MAJOR STOPS: Croatia -> Bosnia & Herzegovina -> Serbia -> Kosovo -> Albania

WORTHWHILE ADDITIONS: Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovenia

THE ARABIAN TRAIL

THE BEST OF THE MIDDLE EAST & A TRULY EXOTIC EXPERIENCE



BEST FOR: Experienced travelers, older travelers, travelers that value a day of exotic experience over a night of parties, history lovers

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Vast Arabian deserts, clashing histories, current events, and experiencing the exotic cultures of Arabia steeped in Islam

BEST START POINTS: Tel Aviv, [Amman](#), Istanbul

For travelers who value profound, exotic cultural experiences over neverending nightlife, the Arabian Trail is well worth considering.

An entire region of the world built on a single, non-Christian religion unfolds into uniquely different cultures (from the west) that are thousands of years old in culture and history.

Otherworldly and martian landscapes, from the Dead Sea to the beautiful red wadis (Wadi Rum), stack the cultural experiences that await you with physical experiences and sights you'll see nowhere else.



(The Treasury of Petra in Jordan)

Being in the epicenter of a region so often portrayed in a myopic light quickly puts the individual traveler (and her own culture) into a more accurate perspective on the world stage.

Beneath these layers of experience, travelers wandering the Middle East will discover well preserved ancient Roman cities, beautiful beaches, and light culinary scenes steeped in culture and the natural wealth of each country.

Note that of all the trails, this trail is the least social and most expensive but still easy to navigate, but possibly the most eye-opening. As such, I recommend doing this trail after a couple of others – but I *absolutely* recommend doing this trail.

MAJOR STOPS: [Egypt](#) -> [Israel](#) -> [Jordan](#) -> [Lebanon](#) -> [Turkey](#)

WORTHWHILE ADDITIONS: Greek Islands

WHY THE TRAILS ARE IMPORTANT FOR YOU AS A TRAVELER, BACKPACKER, AND WANDERER

2 Weeks, 2 Months, or 2 Years, "the Trails" will help you make the most of your adventure

When traveling, there is a string of tasks that create a domino effect, ultimately dictating how much our travels feel like play (or work). From how much experience we squeeze into the limited time we have, to how enjoyable those experiences are – or better said – how worth your time they are, these “tasks” profoundly impact the richness of our travel.

When we plan based on guidebooks, this planning process can be a bit of a gamble.

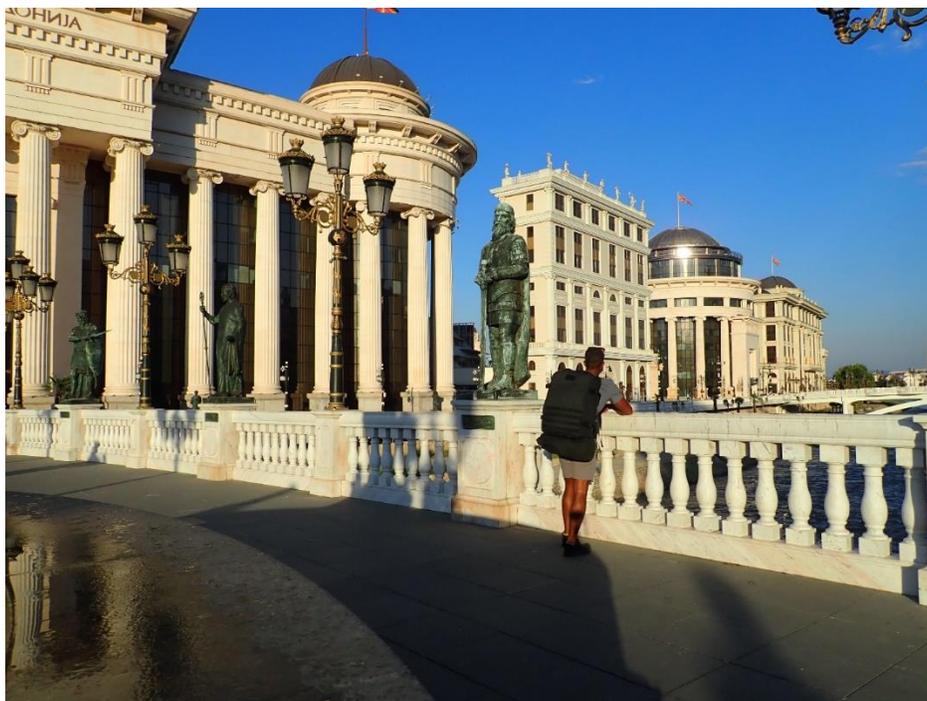
Did we pick the best destinations for our budget, desires, and tastes?

If we have a multi-city/country itinerary, how easy is it to get between destinations?

Given the limited time we have just to wander, is there a balance between transit time (in airports, on buses, and in taxis) and a genuine, worthwhile experience?

When we plan every detail of our trips, we risk botching any of the above.

When we choose one of the trails, whether it's a major trail like the Gringo Trail or Banana Pancake trail or micro trails like Turkey, Vietnam, or Patagonia, our travels naturally achieve a balance between transit, adventure, and making sure the journey is worth the destination. Word of mouth on the trail helps us quickly find the best of everything while adding another layer of experience by connecting us with other travelers, backpackers, and locals.



(A brief break during a “sightseeing hike” through Skopje, Macedonia)

But there's another one up for strategically choosing a "travel trail," especially if you only get to travel for two weeks a year. There are a handful of rich "micro-trails" within countries or small regions that deliver that same, rich backpacking experience but packed into a smaller area. The structure the "trails" bring allows us to squeeze vibrant sights, the same kinds of experiences, and the same satisfaction within a shorter timeframe without the long transit times that eat into our adventure.

I call these more condensed backpacking trails, the "micro-trails."

THE MICRO-TRAILS: CONDENSED TRAVEL ADVENTURES FOR TWO WEEK ESCAPES

The "micro trails" allow us to squeeze backpacking style adventures, with the sights, the experiences, and the connections, into our precious two weeks a year by picking strategic destinations dense with exposure to the world, packed tightly to shorten transit times, and with the same excellent travel infrastructure.

If you have limited time to travel or are new to "backpacker" style travel and worried about all the moving pieces, micro trails are a great place to start.

OVERVIEW OF THE "MICRO-TRAILS

Around the world, there are hundreds of viable "micro-trails" in which a traveler could easily plan a fulfilling two-week "backpacker adventure," but the trails to follow are hands down my favorite.



(A crew of backpackers debating whether to take a beach day in Canggu, Bali)

Each of these micro-trails and destinations delivers irreplaceable memories that you can only create in that specific country/region with a few benefits that help you pack more into less time.

Great transit infrastructure allows you to get around easily. Backpacker and budget traveler friendly accommodation at all comfort levels aids your budget and social life. Most importantly, each “micro-trail” is built on experiences that will leave you wanting more – all easily accomplished in 2 weeks or less.

1. **Vietnam:** The new backpacker trail and moto adventures
2. **Thailand:** A classic starter for backpackers
3. **Philippines:** Waterworld, filled with diving and liveaboard cruises
4. **Bali & the "Gilis":** Island meets Asia meets eclectic
5. **Myanmar:** Ancient civilizations
6. **Sri Lanka:** Animal safaris, tuk tuks, ancient kingdoms, and surfing
7. **Nepal:** A mecca for trekking
8. **Colombia:** Close to home and rich with vibrant experiences
9. **Argentina & Chile:** A Latin American European experience wrapped in wine, steak, and outdoors
10. **Patagonia & the Argentine Lake Districts:** Quintessential trekking experiences in South America
11. **Bolivia, Peru, and Galapagos:** South America's frontier at the Andean Altiplano and the "Tibet of South America"
12. **Turkey:** East meets west dotted with history and otherworldly landscapes
13. **Israel and Jordan:** A quintessential experience of the Middle East, safely, and easily
14. **Croatia & Montenegro:** Coastal Europe with castles and irreplaceable views
15. **Albania:** Mediterranean beaches and emerging experiences

This list will deliver some novel ideas for travel. Now, let's look into why each of these tiny itineraries is perfect for your annual vacation.

1. SRI LANKA

A tropical paradise filled with safaris, tuk tuks, ancient kingdoms, and surfing



(Backpackers soaking up the view of Lion Rock in Sri Lanka)

Traveling Sri Lanka is a potent experience that crosses all bounds. From warm water beaches perfect for sunning and surfing, cool highlands and tea country, to safaris with elephants roaming free, and topped off with ancient ruins that rival Angkor Wat – Sri Lanka is a true, backpacking micro-trail

BEST FOR: Anyone! Older travelers, backpackers, surfers, adventurers

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Touring the country by [tuk tuk](#), seeing 100's of elephants free, 2000+-year-old kingdom ruins, scenic train ride from Kandy to Ella

BEST START POINTS: Colombo

MAJOR STOPS: Colombo, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Arugam Bay, Anuradhapura

TIME REQUIRED: 2 weeks, optimally three weeks

Few places in the world that I've traveled to have delivered the richness and diversity of experience that Sri Lanka offers. Legend says that the Garden of Eden is hidden in Sri Lanka, and after visiting, I believe it.

Whether you want surf, sun, animals, ruins, trekking, mountains, or just rich food and culture, Sri Lanka has it. As a micro-trail, this country is complete. My experience was entire via a Tuk Tuk I drove through the entire country, and very much irreplaceable.



(Monkeys in Sri Lanka just doing what they do during my tuk tuk adventure)

For a full [2 to 3 week Sri Lanka experience](#), start in Colombo but leave quickly, stopping at as many tiny beach towns on the southwest coast that time allows (Mirissa, Hikkaduwa, etc.) stopping at the Dutch fort in Galle along the way.

As you pass through the south, stop at Yala national park to see leopards, gators, buffalo, elephants, monkeys, and peacocks all roaming free on a very cheap safari (less than \$50).



(An elephant “security guard” taking tolls in Sri Lanka)



(A lazy view in Yala National Park, Sri Lanka)

If the season permits, continue to the tiny surf town of Arugam Bay to fall off the map, learn to surf, and sun in peace.

Next, head north into the highlands of Kandy, Ella, and Nuwara Elya, filled with treks through towering and sacred mountains and flanked by amazingly beautiful tea plantations. Don't forget to take the legendarily scenic Kandy to Ella train ride.



(The 9 Arch Bridge, Sri Lanka)

On the last leg of your journey, head to Anuradhapura to explore ruins of the Sinhalese kingdom that date back to the 10th century BC. The freedom to wander through the towering castle ruins and temples of an entire ancient city easily rivals the experience of Angkor Wat – and it is an only hour's drive from other extravagant experiences.



(A view of the beachside hotel in Arugam Bay, Sri Lanka)

For 2 to 3 weeks of exploration, Sri Lanka will deliver unforgettable travel, no matter what you're into.

Learn more about the Sri Lanka experience

- [3 Week Sri Lanka Backpacking Itinerary](#)
 - [6 Great Sri Lanka Safari Tours](#)
 - [Yala National Park Tuk Tuk Safari Experience](#)
 - [Best Beaches in Sri Lanka](#)
- 

2. VIETNAM

The new Southeast Asia backpacking start point and potent with motorcycle adventures



Vietnam now is what Thailand was in the '80s and 90's – a launchpad and the vibrant trail of young and excited backpackers ready to launch onto the banana pancake trail. However, Vietnam surpasses Thailand with a variety of vibrant and adventurous adventures in store.

BEST FOR: Young Backpackers, budget travelers

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Ha Long Bay, Castaway (in Ha Long Bay), Hai Van Pass by motorbike, Ha Giang Loop, [motorbiking the Ho Chi Minh Trail](#)

BEST START POINTS: Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City

MAJOR STOPS: Hanoi, Ha Long Bay, Hoi An, Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City

TIME REQUIRED: 2 weeks for the full tour

Vietnam's backpacker trail strings the entire length of the country, starting or ending in either Ho Chi Minh City (in the south) or Hanoi (in the north). The path between can be accomplished by cheap bus or even by buying a motorbike and "moto-packing" the length of the country, riding on what used to be the Ho Chi Minh Trail from time to time.

Backpacker culture is strong here, with great, cheap, and even luxurious hostels in every city with plenty of backpackers waiting to socialize on free walking tours and nightly pub crawls. For those that want a

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little more privacy, guesthouses and hotels are so cheap you can easily get a private room and keep your budget below \$50 per day.



When not connecting with other travelers, countless experiences await on tiny "excursions" from town that you can do solo or arrange cheaply through hostels.

In the north, Ha Long Bay and the floating islands that inspired Avatar await, offering a day-long boat trip between the towering spires or an overnight "castaway" on one of the many islands.

Tours and exploration (with a guide or solo via motorbike) through the beautiful rice terraces await in the north.



If you have an extra \$300, you can easily buy a used motorbike from another backpacker and explore all of these experiences yourself, around Hanoi and south.

As you begin to fall south through the country, you'll chase waterfalls, canyon down rivers, explore jungles, experience a long, tumultuous, and complicated history of east meets west, and find your own version of paradise along the way.

When your trip is over, fly out of either Ho Chi Minh city or Hanoi as both have frequent, cheap flights. Better yet, continue on the Banana Pancake Trail into Laos (for outdoor adventures) or Cambodia (for ancient kingdoms).

Tips

- Ask your hostel reception for a printed map and to be shown the sites in the city.
- For excursions, tour operators and travel agents dot every city in Vietnam, but if you're uncomfortable venturing out, then ask your hostel/hotel staff for recommendations.

Learn more about the Vietnam experience:

- [The Vietnam Motorcycle Diaries](#)

3. THAILAND

A classic starter for backpackers and island paradise



Just watch the old school classic, "The Beach," and you'll understand why Thailand is a perfect backpacker trail for travelers in search of adventure

BEST FOR: New backpackers, island life lovers, street food enthusiasts

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Street food, SCUBA diving certifications, island life, and boat cruises, backpacker culture

BEST START POINTS: Bangkok, Chiang Mai

MAJOR STOPS: Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pai, Koh Tao/Koh Pha Ngan, Koh Phi Phi, Koh Lanta

TIME REQUIRED: 2 weeks

Though Khao San Road is getting cleaned up a lot and the new Thai government is becoming more restrictive of drinking, partying, curfews, Thailand is still a fantastic destination not to be missed by first-time travelers and backpackers.



Thailand's layers and depth allow you to paint your travel adventure and go as deep as you'd like to.

For foodies, very few other places in the world boast the street food experience that Bangkok does, and Thailand's food scene is arguably only topped by Japan in Southeast Asia.



(A brief adventure near Krabi, Thailand)

For those in search of peace, the temple experiences and motorbiking between rice fields around Chiang Mai and Pai deliver a serene feel that has sucked away many travelers.

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The warm, clear, and pristine waters of the countless islands – Koh Tao, Koh Pha Ngan, and Koh Lanta being perfect start points – make beautiful places to grab a beach hut, learn to SCUBA dive on the cheap (\$225), or just enjoy an aquatic paradise.

Last but not least, a robust backpacker scene with luxurious yet cheap hostels and shared accommodation makes it easy to find friends on the road. Daily free walking tours and nightly open pub crawls are the norms making socializing a no-brainer.

For new travelers in need of sunshine and cheap adventures, Thailand can't be beaten.

4. THE PHILIPPINES

Waterworld, filled with diving and liveboard cruises



With over 7,000 islands, the Philippines is a potent paradise that revolves around aquatic experiences. If your idea of a perfect adventure is nothing but water and beaches, the Philippines may be right up your alley.

Though the Philippines is slightly more expensive than other Southeast Asian destinations and generally not very luxurious for the price, and can also be difficult to navigate via boats and planes, the beaches and underwater experiences make the sacrifice worth it.

Pick a large island or cluster (i.e., Cebu, Palawan, Siargao, Negros Islands) and build your adventure around that center point and you can cram some amazing travels into just two weeks

BEST FOR: SCUBA diving, freediving, liveboard cruises, snorkeling, beach-ing, whale sharks

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Diving with whale sharks, world-class dive sites, living on a ship

BEST START POINTS: Manila, Cebu City

MAJOR STOPS: Cebu Island, Bohol Island, Palawan Island, Luzon Island, Siargao Island

TIME REQUIRED: 2 weeks minimum

Traveling the Philippines happens at a different pace and is an entirely different adventure. You'll do best by dedicating two weeks to a specific island or island cluster, deciding what you love to do most in the water, and going all in.



(A sight from freediving with whale sharks)

On some of the best islands, tourism infrastructure (hostels, hotels) won't be the cheapest or the most luxurious, but the daily boat tours between islands to snorkel, dive, and barbecue will be otherworldly.

Liveaboard cruises, which can last from 3 days to 2 weeks, give you the experience of living onboard a large, traditional Filipino boat and traveling between islands that have never even seen a westerner before.



(The Chocolate Hills of Bohol, Philippines)

Palawan, with El Nido, [Coron](#), and countless other destinations, is a worthwhile island to consider with beautiful beaches and an emerging backpacker scene. Coron Island, a mere 3 hours away by boat, has some of the most amazing underwater scenery I've ever seen and 10 World War 2 era shipwrecks, half of which at snorkeling depth.

If you love the water, the Philippines will deliver everything you've ever wanted in a vacation.

Learn more about the Philippines experience:

- [The Perfect 2 Week Philippines Itinerary](#)

5. BALI & THE "GILIS"

A Southeast Asia paradise that combines the best of east and bohemian west with an island life backdrop



BEST FOR: Anyone! Backpackers, surfers, divers, yogis, spiritual types, island lovers, and vacationers

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Surfing (newbie to advanced), SCUBA diving, freediving, beaches, parties, volcano hiking, and spiritual experiences

BEST START POINTS: Canggu, Ubud

MAJOR STOPS: Canggu, Ubud, "the Bukit", Nusa Lembongan, the Gilis (Air, Meno, T), Lombok

TIME REQUIRED: 10 to 14 days

TIPS:

- End your trip in either Canggu or Uluwatu/Bingin/Padang
- Move quickly past Seminyak, Kuta, and Denpasar

Nestled among the 17,508 islands of Indonesia is the unique and eclectic traveler paradise of Bali.

A combination of near-perfect weather and water year-round, island vibes, a welcome Southeast Asian culture, and a heavy presence of Bohemian foreigners makes for a cultural climate and travel experience

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that is difficult to recreate anywhere in the world. If you only have 10 to 14 days for vacation, Bali is a great place to max out your experiences while recharging and enjoying them at the same time.

Bali presents a very balance opportunity to explore on foot, by motorbike, and by sea, with plenty of time and chances to relax and party in between. The bottom line is no matter who you are; you'll enjoy the combination of authentic cultural experiences and more "contrived" environments that have popped up thanks to the traveler scene on the island.



For ocean lovers, SCUBA diving and freediving opportunities abound, with great diving on the Gilis, Nusa Lembongan, and Lombok for around \$35 a dive. If you're not certified as a SCUBA diver or freediver, any of these islands are a great place to do your course – the courses are cheap, the dive sites are *amazing*, and the backdrop (Bali) is as fun as it gets. Don't skip snorkeling the shipwreck in peaceful Amed.

For surfers and aspiring surfers, surf breaks and opportunities to jump in at all levels abound. For beginner surfers, there are countless surf resorts and surf hostels, surfboard rental for ~\$3.50 to \$7, and instructors for about ~\$25 per 2-hour session. For advanced surfers, Bali boasts plenty of world-class breaks, and you could have a custom surfboard made here for your trip for ~\$350 or just buy one on the island for \$200 to \$300.

For trekkers and explorers by foot, jungle treks and volcano hikes (like Agung and Mount Rinjani) abound.

Life on Bali happens by motorbike, so two-wheeled adventurers will find more than their fair share of fun. It's possible to rent a scooter on the island for ~\$3 a day, then ride around the island on a 3-day trip. Bring your international driver's permit, or just some extra cash to handle "violations" with the police.



All of these fantastic adventures happen on an island that is extremely spiritual and unique as the Balinese Hindus that inhabit the island the minority in a Muslim country. Holidays such as Nyepi (the day of silence and preceding festivals), Galungan & Kuningan, endless ceremonies, and religious sites around every corner add genuine, unadulterated cultural experiences to your trips.

Then...the parties. Oh, those parties.

It would be impossible to have so much enjoyment in an island paradise like this and *not* get social. Anything you want to

Where to go in Bali:

I highly recommend starting your trip in the beach town of Canggu if you haven't been to Bali. Canggu is a burgeoning little surf town that has become a mecca for backpackers and Bohemian westerners in Bali – whether for a day or a year – and rivals Ubud for such culture, but differently. This little stretch of beach and the rice fields and guesthouses behind it have amazing fusion restaurants and healthy eats, tons of coffee shops, coworking spaces, and more chic and unique bars than you could experience in a single trip. From sunset coconuts on the beach to cocktails with rice field views in the speakeasy (the one near the shortcut), Bali will keep you socialized, entertained, and smiling.



(Tannah Lot, a temple complex on the Indian Ocean)

The odd thing about Bali as a micro-trail is that there is no actual *trail* to follow on the island. Most destinations are within 1 to 3 hours of each other, and ridesharing via the Go-Jek and Grab apps make last-minute planning a prime option. To add to the fact that there is no *actual* backpacker trail to follow in Bali, most of the island's adventures and sites are clustered and varied (surfing, yoga, sightseeing, etc.), making it difficult to define one single path or itinerary.

The solution: do whatever you want, but start in Canggu.

Just show up, book a hostel, guesthouse, or villa, and soak up Canggu for a few days (if you have the time). From here, you'll get a feel of what is best for *you* in Bali – yoga, beach bumming, exploring, etc. Then, book a van the day before you want to go wherever calls you. I highly recommend ending your itinerary in the Bukit (the peninsula in the south) as this region has the most beautiful beaches with the clearest water and best surfing (thanks to the reef). The Bukit also runs at a different pace that is perfect for ending your itinerary.

Beyond that advice, just go. You'll find your way easily when you get there.

Research and consider these other locations as part of your haphazard itinerary

- Ubud (yoga, trekking Mount Agung)
- Amed (freediving and SCUBA diving courses in peace, snorkeling a shipwreck)
- Canggu (Hipster haven and coffee shop mecca)
- The Bukit: Uluwatu, Padang, and Bingin (surf mecca, best beaches on Bali)
- Singaraja (waterfalls and dolphins)
- Gili Trawangan (SCUBA diving)
- Gili Air + Gili Meno: Gili T, but with peace and quiet
- Nusa Lembongan + Nusa Penida (SCUBA diving)

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- Lombok around Kuta (Surfing, diving)
- Seminyak: Only for daytime beach clubs (Potatohead, Ku De Ta, La Favela)
- Seminyak Beach near Double Six: Beginner friendly surfing without the chaos of Canggu/Batu Bolong/Old Mans

More Info:

- [A Perfect 7 Day Bali Itinerary](#)
 - [25 Things to Do in Canggu](#)
 - [My Adventure of Learning to Surf on Bali](#)
-

6. NEPAL

A mecca for trekking



(A view of the Himalayas in Nepal on the EBC Trek)

If the mountains bring you excitement or peace then few places in the world will fuel you as much as the Himalayas, and Nepal is *the* place to explore the Himalayas

BEST FOR: Trekkers, campers, and outdoorsmen

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: The [Everest Base Camp Trek](#), The Annapurna Circuit

BEST START POINTS: Kathmandu

TIME REQUIRED: 2 to 3 weeks per trek

Nepal is a trekkers paradise with towering views from all angles. For outdoor-oriented travelers and mountain lovers, this destination is unique in that you only trek – and you don't necessarily need to camp.

Along most every trek in Nepal, a robust network of "teahouses," or minimalist, budget-friendly guesthouses, dot the trail, fully equipped with beds, bathrooms, and small restaurants. These accommodations range from spartan to luxurious, allowing you to enjoy the experience of walking through the mountains by day, with only a day pack, without worrying about the logistics of surviving the night.



(A celebration at Everest Base Camp)

Beyond the convenience of teahouses, the Everest Base Camp trek, and seeing Mount Everest, otherworldly experiences are well worth the time, energy, and effort.

If you have 2 to 3 weeks to spare and love a walk through the hills, start planning your trip to Nepal.

Learn more about the Nepal Experience:

- [Everest Base Camp Trek Itinerary and Guide](#)
- [A Travel Story: The Everest Base Camp Experience](#)
- [How much does the Everest Base Camp Trek cost?](#)
- [How difficult is the Everest Base Camp Trek? Can I do it?](#)

7. COLOMBIA:

Close to home and rich with vibrant experiences



A little bit of everything and every bit of it will make you smile. From beaches to great food, to vibrant Latin nights filled with salsa dancing, to camping in national parks on the ocean, to Carnival, Colombia offers a bit of everything, easily accessible, at a price that is hard to beat.

BEST FOR: Backpackers and travelers of all ages

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Latin/South American culture, white sand beaches, coffee plantations, salsa dancing, Carnival

BEST START POINTS: Medellin, Bogota, Cartagena

MAJOR STOPS: Medellin, Cartagena, Baranquill (for Carnival), Santa Marta

TIME REQUIRED: Minimum ten days

Colombia presents an escape that is close to North America in the distance but far away in culture and experience as it packs so much into a small space, allowing you to pack *everything* into a trip.

Anything and everything you would come to Latin America to feel can be found in Colombia and experienced over two weeks.

Fly into Bogota, Medellin, or Cartagena for cheap flights, and launch forward from there.

Enjoy the cool sea air in the Spanish Colonial city of Cartagena.

Time your trip to spend Carnival in Barranquilla, arguably the largest, best, and cheapest Carnival outside of Brazil that nearly matches Brazil's Carnival.



Head to Santa Marta for tours of organic, hydro-electric powered coffee plantations between SCUBA diving for cheap and camping on the ocean. Spend some time on white sand some time in there.

Pass through Guatapé, Colombia, for an exciting experience of islands in the mountains, perfect for summertime.

Then continue onto the Zona Cafetera (coffee region) for a truly educational and enriching coffee experience, ending in Cali for a *real* education in salsa.

The beauty of this itinerary – you can do it in nearly any order. With Colombia being so small and tightly packed and flights being so cheap, all of these experiences and more could fit into ten days (optimally 2+ weeks).



If you're in North America and are craving a "gap year backpacker" style experience a short flight away, head to Colombia.

8. ARGENTINA & CHILE

A Latin American European experience wrapped in wine, steak, and outdoors



(A view of Santiago, Chile)

After ten years of travel, no place has captured my heart the way Argentina has, and the Chilean landscapes and mountains followed closely after.



Argentina combines the best experiences in refinement and roughing it, taking you from the "gritty European" feel of Buenos Aires to the frontiers of Patagonia, all in one trip.

BEST FOR: Late 20's and 30's travelers, trekkers

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Buenos Aires, Argentine wine country, the lake district, Patagonia

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BEST START POINTS: Buenos Aires

MAJOR STOPS: Buenos Aires, Mendoza, San Carlos de Bariloche, [El Chalten](#), Torres del Paine National Park, Santiago (for departure)

TIME REQUIRED: 3 weeks minimum, ideally 1-2 months

This micro trail delivers refinement and roughing it all in one itinerary. Though you could plan day by day, if possible, I recommend just traveling to each destination, absorbing the experiences, and staying as long as you feel like.

Start the adventure of Argentina and Chile with Buenos Aires – a gritty version of Barcelona, Spain. Things aren't as well kept as in Barcelona or anywhere else in Spain, but the ambiance and energy are still there. Neverending nightlife, top-notch "Asados" (Argentine BBQ), walking tours in search of history, graffiti, and food, and the simultaneous warmth and arrogance of "Porteno" (Buenos Aires local) culture will suck you in.



Once you've had your fill, depart for Mendoza.

Mendoza, Argentina, is the epicenter of Argentine and Latin American wine culture boasting the Malbec grape but also plenty of vines transplanted from Italy. The beauty of Mendoza is in how well the region caters to travelers and backpackers via its "tours."

Tours in the wine country in Mendoza, actually located in the city of Maipu, actually involve just renting a bike and riding between wineries, walking up, and asking for a taste – don't worry, they're waiting for you. Along the way, you find restaurants, olive tastings, vinegar tastings, and tons of other backpackers to share the experience with.



You need one day for all of this, but you could easily spend three days exploring.

After your wine-down, either consider hiking Aconcagua nearby (the tallest peak in South America), or continue to the Lake Districts and Patagonia

The Lake Districts and Patagonia will enchant you for as long as you allow them to. Thousands of miles of trail wind between peaks that are topped by ice year-round. A calm serenity fills the air everywhere you go, and trekking and the outdoors permeates travel and culture everywhere down here.

San Carlos de Bariloche and Torres del Paine National Park are where I fell in love with the outdoors.

In all honesty, this itinerary deserves 1 to 2 months of your time, but if you have three weeks available and want to taste Europe and the outdoors, plan an efficient itinerary to Argentina and Chilean Patagonia.

Learn more about the Argentina and Chile Experience:

- [El Chalten Hiking Guide](#)
- [Torres del Paine Trekking Guide](#)

10: PERU, BOLIVIA, & GALAPAGOS

Ancient, adventurous, and animal-filled Latin America



Latin America is a diverse and exciting adventure. Though most countries speak Spanish, the values and quintessential experiences of each are *very* different – and this especially includes Peru, Bolivia, and the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador. The ancient ruins and cuisine of Peru, the Himalayas like mountains and badlands of Bolivia, and the animal-centric experience of the Galapagos Islands patch together to create a unique adventure that would be difficult to recreate elsewhere.

BEST FOR: Rough backpackers, adventurers, trekkers, animal lovers

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Salar de Uyuni, Trekking the "South American Himalayas," the Inca Trail (or Salcantay Trail), swimming with welcoming wildlife in the Pacific

BEST START POINTS: La Paz, Bolivia, and end in Galapagos

MAJOR STOPS: La Paz, Cusco, Lima, Guayaquil -> Galapagos

TIME REQUIRED: 1 week per destination if done together, two if each country is visited individually

Now let's review the potential recommended itinerary in reverse.

THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

Eye-opening experiences with animals and experience what the world would be without man



Few places in the world allow you to experience animals as up close and personal as the Galapagos Islands. The Islands of Isla de San Cristobal, Isla Santa Cruz, and Isla Isabela each offer a different flavor of how to experience the paradise meets animal sanctuary.

Each island of the Galapagos Archipelago specializes in a type of animal and experience, allowing you to fly into the islands and book excursions to craft your own experience. From snorkeling with hammerhead sharks, penguins, and sea lions, to swimming through lava tunnels, to walking in volcano craters and witnessing how islands are born and die, every moment on Galapagos offers something that few other destinations offer.

Here's the shocker – a Galapagos islands trip can be crafted for as little as \$50 per day. This daily budget includes an excursion every other day to snorkel, boat, and dive, amazing seafood each night, and impressive yet peaceful beaches on your doorstep while making a micro-sized "backpacking adventure" possible.

Now, let's address the eternal question about Galapagos travel: Should you take a cruise or stay on the islands?

For backpackers and budget travelers, I *highly* recommend merely staying on the islands. A balance of reasonably priced excursions out to the highlights of the islands ranges from \$25 to \$125, allowing you to plan your adventure. At the same time, free things to do on each island that are just as fun make a budget-friendly Galapagos trip easier than anyone would expect. Last, Galapagos is a beachy paradise in the Pacific Ocean. Staying on the island allows you just to take some days off and lay on the beach by day and enjoy the freshest, cleanest seafood available and locally brewed beer by night.

Compare this experience to being confined to a boat for an entire week at 3x to 4x the cost of an *on*-island vacation, and you'll see why island hopping is a much better option than the boat cruise.

To make this Galapagos islands adventure happen, fly into the islands from Guayaquil for cheaper flights, then pass through the islands, creating your itinerary very intentional and built around the animals you want to see. For reference, Isla San Cristobal is the posh and more expensive island, Isla Santa Cruz is a very balanced destination offering a bit of everything, and Isla Isabela has a rougher. Off the beaten track feel. If you're on a budget, stick to Islas Isabela and Santa Cruz.

PERU

Incan ruins, Incan Treks, and Amazing Food



Peru is famous for the Incan ruins of Macchu Picchu, but there is so much more to this destination than *those* ruins.

If you're coming from Galapagos, make your way to Lima first, where you'll soak up Peruvian culture and cuisine. Peru arguably has *the* best food scene in South America, and Peru's best food happens in Lima – from ceviche to reimagined traditional dishes, to Asian-Latin fusion, you can eat your heart out in Lima.

If your schedule is cramped and you're short on time, feel free to move quickly through Lima and on to Cusco, where the irreplaceable sites are.



In Cusco, spend at least a day exploring the city and all of the ancient buildings as well as the food scene while you acclimatize, daring to try the local favorite "cuy" (guinea pig) if you dare. Honestly, it was the worst thing I've ever tasted, but it's worth the experience. Everything else in Cusco that I tasted was amazing.

Make it a point to wander outside of the main town and into the hills, and you'll find *tons* of well-preserved ruins that no one cares about, but you'll still love seeing.

When the time is right, head out on your trail to Macchu Picchu – either the Inca trail or the Salcantay Trail.

The Inca Trail is a great experience, but prices have gone up as reservations are now booked up three months out. FYI, there are many other trails used by the ancient Incas to get to Machu Picchu, and the Salcantay Trek is one of them.

The Salcantay Trek will be just as amazing, lighter on your budget, and won't require the same "3 months out" reservation.

After seeing Machu Picchu and checking that experience off your bucket list, move on to the badlands of Bolivia.

BOLIVIA

The Tibet of South America, perfect for trekking and rough exploration



The Bolivia portion of the Latin America micro-trail is *very much* optional and recommended only for backpackers and travelers that are craving adventure.

Many of the significant experiences in Bolivia are far off the beaten path and require rougher overland travel in rickety buses to reach dry, high altitude deserts. If you like adventure, you'll *love* what happens here.

In the high altitude capital of La Paz, try some grilled beef hearts as street food, take a free walking tour, consider doing a very risky tour of the prison, and move on for more adventure.

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After the capitol, consider mountain biking the most dangerous road in the world, visiting the far off salt flats at Salar de Uyuni, visiting Lake Titicaca, or trekking the numerous high altitude mountains for a hard adventure.

11. TURKEY

East meets west experiences dotted with history and fairytale landscapes



(The Blue Mosque of Istanbul)

Nestled in a place of "east meets west" with its continent bridging Europe and Asia, Turkey is a destination jam-packed with rich experiences and variety. Ruins, fairy landscapes, fantastic food, culture, and mounds of history within a short and easily navigable distance make Turkey the perfect place to fill a two-week adventure.

BEST FOR: All travelers, short term travelers, backpackers, gap year travelers, older travelers

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Cappadocia ballooning and fairy landscapes, Roman ruins, beaches, history, food, dense culture, unadulterated travel

BEST START POINTS: Istanbul, Izmir

MAJOR STOPS: Istanbul, Cappadocia, Bodrum, Izmir + Ephesus + Wine Country

TIME REQUIRED: 2 weeks

In terms of single country travel, Turkey has been one of my richest, purest travel experiences in a place where vastly different cultures mix, and the joy of travel feels so untouched. Yes, you will see travelers everywhere, but the adventure isn't very touristy. Yes, you will take tours through the fairytale-like lands of Cappadocia, but the sights and sounds still feel very genuine. Yes, there are hostels and guesthouses, but the majority of the population you interact with is made up of locals.



(Hot air balloons by sunrise over the fairytale landscapes of Cappadocia)

Turkey is genuine. That is the simplest way I can put it.

The capital city of Istanbul alone is a wonder that could fill an itinerary. The once Roman and now Turkish capital city is split by a waterway leaving Asia on one side (with a very Middle Eastern feel), and Europe on another side with all that one would expect of Europe. Roman castles are hidden beneath average cafes and open for exploring. The food is uniquely simple yet addictive. The sights range from the grand Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque to the Topkapi Palace museum containing storied relics like the sword of David and beard of the prophet Muhammad, all up for public viewing. And this is just *one* city in Turkey.

Proceed on to Cappadocia and witness a world of fairy chimneys and cave cities with a history (and exciting story) that dates back 2000+ years. You'll hear all about that on the green and red walking tours with a traditional Turkish bath in between.



Continue on south to Izmir (the Portland of Turkey, Turkey's most liberal city) as a jump-off point to see the most well preserved Roman city in the world (Ephesus) with a side trip to amazing wineries.



(The library of the ancient Roman city of Ephesus)

To finish off this short trip, make your way to Bodrum and the southwest and south coast to experience the Mediterranean seascapes and beaches shared with the Greek islands at Turkish prices (much lower).

All of this adds up to a "micro-adventure" that will fit nearly any itinerary and a worthwhile micro-trail.

Learn more about the Turkey backpacking experience:

- [A Travel Story: Backpacking Turkey PT 1 – Greece to Turkey](#)
 - [The Perfect 10 Day Turkey Itinerary for Backpackers](#)
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12. ISRAEL AND JORDAN

A quintessential experience of the Middle East, safely, and easily



(Posing camels in the Wadi Rum desert of Jordan)

The Middle East is an undeniably influential and exotic region of the world. Many religions, technological and intellectual innovations, and even present-day global issues have their roots in the Middle East. To travel the world without seeing the Middle East is to intentionally leave a large blind spot in one's perspective and experience.

The micro-trail of Israel and Jordan is a relatively easy, enjoyable, and informative trip through the heart of the Middle East wherein you'll experience the best the region has to offer while getting up close and personal with some exotic cultures – and issues. It is *highly* recommended.

BEST FOR: All travelers. I don't recommend it as a first backpacking destination, but I highly recommend it

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Experiencing Jerusalem, the Banksy art museum in the West Bank, Petra (city of stone), Wadi Rum Marsian desert

BEST START POINTS: Tel Aviv, Amman

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MAJOR STOPS: Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, the West Bank, Wadi Rum, Petra, Red Sea (diving and snorkeling), Dead Sea

TIME REQUIRED: 2 weeks

At some point in every traveler's journey, they *must* travel to the Middle East. The experience, culture, and environment are so exotic, the ties from the world that lead back to the locale, so numerous, and the sights and realizations are so irreplaceable. At some point, we must all go.



Unfortunately, given current events and popular news in the media, most travelers avoid the Middle East for fear of safety.

Jordan and Israel present a *very* safe option for quickly absorbing the best this region has to offer in an easily navigable way.

On the issue of your personal safety in Israel

Israel is *extremely* safe, as they take internal security very seriously (as you'll experience during the entrance interview at the airport). Within the country, issues are closely monitored, and the local security authorities are very proactive. Frankly, given Israel's poor relations with its neighbors, the country overcompensates by focusing heavily on safety.

On the issue of your personal safety in Jordan

Jordan is also *extremely* safe, but for different reasons. Since the recent refugee crisis began, The Kingdom of Jordan has opened its doors to refugees, welcoming them in and doing its best to help wherever possible. In the process, Jordan has boosted security screening processes (of anyone coming into the country), improved security within the country (to quickly monitor changing situations), and fostered good relations with its neighbors. Check your own country's State Department/Foreign Affairs recommendations, but Jordan is arguably one of *the* safest places in the Middle East.

Now that we've handled the elephant in the room.

Why you *must* visit Israel

Visiting Israel will not only immerse you in picturesque views and foreign culture – from Hummus spots to local markets to an invisible divide between ethnicities and classes – but will give you a different perspective on current events.



(The Monastery of Petra)

Walking tours through Tel Aviv will share the burgeoning history of this very new city and the plight of the Jews in the Middle East and globally.

Visiting Jerusalem, the Old City, the Wailing Wall, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre will immerse you in a feeling that is very difficult to describe – even if you are not religious.

Wandering over to the West Bank will give an eye-opening, and perception questioning looked into how societies can develop in a way that benefits some, but not all. The experience of crossing the border as a passport carrying Westerners while watching the treatment of "locals" is an experience that is hard to shake. Don't forget to stop by the Banksy art museum, located just across the border – an open-air art display as well as a closed facility graffiti museum that shines a light on the issues you'll experience in a very *artistic* way.

Why you *must* visit Jordan

Jordan is arguably the best and safest place in the world to experience pure Arabian and Muslim culture, and this is just a layer on top of the experience.

Hummus, lamb, falafel, chai, and countless other seemingly delicious but straightforward dishes will be a crucial point of your Middle East, and global, travels.



Continue to see [Petra](#), city of stone. This ancient city and remnant of Arabian kingdoms past were grand enough to be featured in an Indiana Jones movie and not to be missed.

The red Martian deserts of Wadi Rum are the perfect place for a 4x4 tour of the desert followed by night under the stars hosted at a Bedouin camp in the desert.

If you have any time left, check out the peculiar Dead Sea and proceed to the Red Sea for some of the best snorkeling, SCUBA diving, and freediving in the world.

Learn more about the Jordan travel experience:

- [The Perfect 4 Day Jordan Itinerary](#)
- [Inside Petra: A guide to seeing the city of stone](#)
- [24 Hour Guide to Wadi Rum: Camping with Bedouin, 4x4 experiences on Mars, and more](#)

13. CROATIA & MONTENEGRO

Coastal Europe with castles and irreplaceable views



A European experience for backpackers on a budget, Croatia and Montenegro offered the best of the Balkans and southern Europe – castles, beaches, fjords, and parties – on a budget and in an easily navigable way.

BEST FOR: Backpackers, younger travelers, partiers, older travelers

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Game of Thrones (Dubrovnik), Fjords, renting a boat, island parties

BEST START POINTS: Dubrovnik, Split, Pula (for longer itineraries)

MAJOR STOPS: Dubrovnik, Kotor, Hvar, Split

TIME REQUIRED: 1 week

Croatia and Kotor are amazingly developed locations that deliver the best in Europe (and more) without the costs. Younger travelers and backpackers will love the beach and party scene by the water. Older travelers will appreciate castles, architecture, history, wine, and food. Good travelers will immerse themselves in plenty of both.

To make the most of Croatia, make your way to Dubrovnik as your start point, exploring the walled city that was made famous by Game of Thrones. The views from above, below, and inside are incredible.



From Dubrovnik, travel south to Montenegro to experience "the southernmost fjords in Europe" – towering green mountains with warm waterways between the rival anything in Norway. Aim for Kotor – a perfect little backpacker's secret with luxurious hostels and hotels on the water and beach for cheap.

Montenegro is a beautiful place, in landscape and architecture, and a highlight of my Balkan experience.

Within Kotor...

Within Kotor, by day, join a boat tour that shuttles you through the waterways to beaches and sites by day, by night, join friends and pub crawlers going between restaurants and bars in the amazingly preserved, walled Old City. Before the end of your trip, be sure to make "the hike" to see the valley and Kotor from the top of a mountain for a breath-taking view.



(A view of Kotor, Montenegro from above)

After you have absorbed enough of Kotor, meander up to Split...and Hvar...

Within Split...

Split is not *quite* an exciting place, but more of a jump-off point to Hvar – a mythical place.

During your short time in Split, explore Croatian cuisines and the local firewater (rakija) while wandering around the vast castle compounds of the city. The principal, walled city, houses Diocletian's Palace and a story about Diocletian while he strategically extricated himself from the throne as Emperor of Rome and became one of the few emperors that *didn't* die from assassination because of that slick move. Great story...

After exploring the palace, head to Hvar.

Hvar...

Hvar is quite frankly a party spot. Hvar is an island with incredible, centuries-old streets and castles, but with no rules.

By day, backpackers wander from the beach to beach sipping cocktails and enjoying the ambiance and sun. You can even rent and captain your own boat without ever having driven one before and take the boat island hopping and relaxing for the day. I did it twice and highly recommend it.



From here, if you have any time left on your itinerary, Bosnia (Mostar), Serbia (Belgrade), and Albania are a bus ride or train ride away to continue exploring.

Balkans, and primely Montenegro and Croatia, are perfect for those tiny, adventurous itineraries.

14. ALBANIA

Mediterranean beaches and emerging experiences



If you're in Europe traveling and crave a *genuinely* adventurous experience with amazing beaches, Albania is your bet. With a complicated history and recently opened borders but hundreds of miles of beautiful Mediterranean coastline, Albania has much for those willing to get off the beaten path.

BEST FOR: Adventurous backpackers that love beaches

HIGHLIGHT EXPERIENCES: Beaches, the thrill of traveling a largely uncharted destination

BEST START POINTS: Tirana

MAJOR STOPS: Tirana then...?

TIME REQUIRED: 2-3 weeks

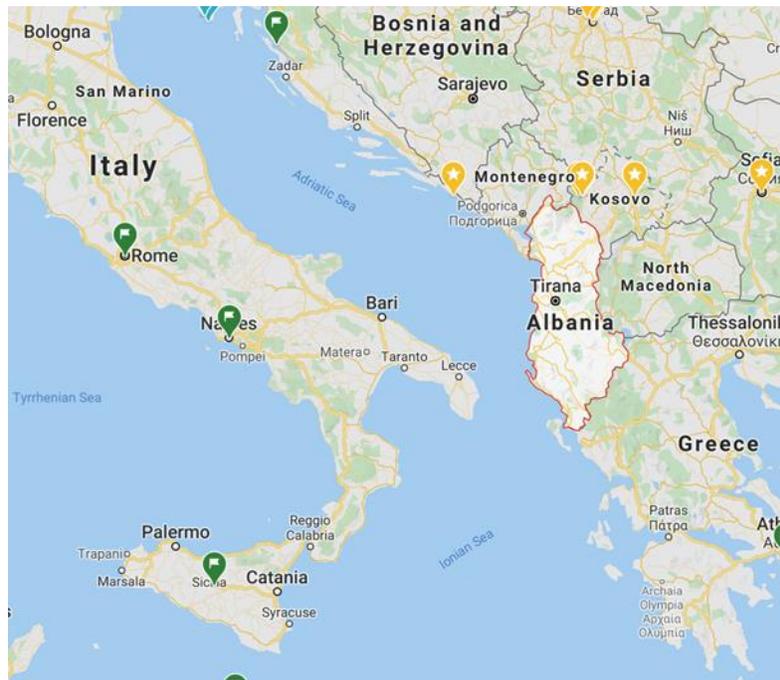
When I first heard of the idea of going to Albania, a backpacker described it as "like going to India, but it's in Europe, and there are amazing beaches." As odd as that sounds, it was scarily accurate.

Albania was under strict communism and a dictatorship with closed borders until 1998 – at which time some Albanians didn't even know the wall fell in Germany in 1989. From that point forward, Albania slowly rejoined the rest of the world and did so slowly, but surely. As such, you'll still feel a country that feels oddly behind, but eager to catch up.

Honestly, the only way I can describe Albania is exactly as it was explained to me – like traveling through India, in Europe, with fantastic beaches.

If you enjoy adventure travel, you'll love what Albania has to offer.

Look at a map of Albania, and you'll see the country has the same coveted coastline in the Mediterranean that Italy, Greece, and Croatia all share, and the beaches in Albania are *just* as beautiful. The difference is you'll likely have the beaches all to yourself.



As you explore the country, you'll find interesting abandoned bunkers everywhere – though some have been turned into hostels, restaurants, and cafes. During the paranoid dictatorship, Albania built over 173,000 bunkers, averaging ~5 per kilometer. That interesting fact (which is more interesting to see than hear) is one of many that will make your wanderings through Albania such a unique experience.

FAQ

With all of the information we've presented, you're bound to have a few questions, and we're here to help! The last thing we want is for an unanswered question to be what stands between you and your dream travels.

If you have a question that's not on this list, email Carlos@ABrotherAbroad.com and we'll help wherever we can!

Why hostels? What if I don't like hostels?

Hostels are the perfect tool for backpacker travel because:

1. **Hostels are cheap, much cheaper than hotels** (usually 10% to 25% of hotel prices)
2. **Hostels are social, making it easy to meet new friends** when you're traveling solo. If you stay in hostels, trust me, you'll never be alone, and a friend will always be right around the corner
3. **Hostels offer lots of information and services that make planning travel easier.** At a decent hostel, on arrival, you'll get a map of the town and recommended sites and food recommendations, and they will likely book tours, travel to your next destination, and recommended accommodation at your next destination all through the reception

What if I'm "old"? Isn't staying in a hostel a bad idea?

Hostels aren't just the dank dorm room you may be imagining and absolutely have some *very* luxurious shared accommodations available. For example, this wine cellar hostel that I stayed in for a stint in Porto, Portugal, was AMAZING. A comfy queen bed, squeaky clean accommodations, and a full spread of meals that were cooked by a Portuguese grandma that came by daily.

However, we're staying at hostels more for the social atmosphere and resources than budget concerns, so if you're scared of sharing accommodation, you can achieve the same ends by booking a private room at a hostel. This way, you get the social atmosphere and the planning assistance of reception, but you don't have to worry about the "sharing" issues you might typically have in a hostel.

How will I get around? From the airport to my hostel? From one city to the next?

A few options making getting to your hostel easy

1. **Directions provided by hostels in Hostelworld.com**
2. **Google Maps directions using public transportation**
3. **Rideshare (Uber, Grab, Go-Jek, etc.)**
4. **Airport shuttle**

If you're staying at a hostel, book through Hostelworld.com and check the hostel description for directions. Any good hostel will list the cheapest and most efficient methods for getting from the airport to your accommodation

Getting from the airport to your hostel/hotel, the best bet is to use the "Public Transportation" feature in Google Maps. This feature has saved me tons of money and hassle. Using this, you'll be able to find if public transportation (metro, train, bus) is available from the airport to your destination.

These days, nearly every country has a rideshare app, and in every country listed above, rideshare is cheaper than taxi rides. Know the rideshare app for your country in advance,

download it in advance and ensure you have a way to stay connected, and make this an easy go-to

An airport shuttle booked at the airport is another safe bet for getting to your hostel quickly that will be cheaper than a taxi.

Getting from one city to the next:

Buses, vans, trains, and any ground transportation (excluding taxis) will be the most cost-efficient way to get around.

To find the best way between cities, I recommend Rome2Rio.com (or the app), which provides an array of options, or asking your hostel staff.

When using Rome2Rio, I recommend searching on the app to find out which providers offer transportation and then going directly to their sites.

In Southeast Asia, Asia2Go is a great, full-spectrum travel aggregator that I book boat, bus, or rail travel directly through.

What if I'm alone? Should I still travel, even alone?

Still travel if you're alone.

Stay in hostels, and you won't be traveling alone for long.

In total, I've probably spent four years backpacking with at least 3 of those completely unaccompanied. These "solo travel years" were the times that I had the most adventure and made the most new friendships. Being alone allows you to follow the current of travel and let it go where it wants to take you, and where you *need* to go.

Though the times I traveled with a partner or friend have been great, traveling with someone made it harder to meet other travelers and harder to give in to the spontaneity and constantly arising opportunities that make travel even better.

Bottom line: If you have to travel solo, embrace it. You're in for an unexpected but pleasant surprise. And stay at hostels. Definitely stay at hostels.

How much should I plan?

The better question is, how much do you *need* to plan. The answer is, not at all. I recommend knowing the following elements of information before you travel.

- **The kind of experiences that make life worth living *for you***
- **The countries on your itinerary and the start cities for each country**
- **The highlights (2 to 4) of the country that you can't miss**
- **The average budget per day and how much above that you can afford**

- **The hostel you'll stay in initially in your first city, and check for directions to there from the airport**

...and that's it—anything else you can discover on the road. If you know all of the above when you start your trip, regardless of how long you'll be on the way, you'll be just fine.

How do I meet people and get this "word of mouth" information while traveling

Meeting people while traveling is as natural as breathing. However, to allay your fears put these on your list as sources of friends on the road:

- **Hostels:** Hangout in the lounge or join some hostel activities (walking tour, pub crawl, game night), and you'll have more friends than you can handle
- **Free Walking Tours:** Arranged through your hostel or found online, these tours are great activities and fun places to mingle. Just Google "Free Walk Tour [city]" and you'll get plenty of options
- **Facebook Backpacking Groups:** For every country on every trail above, there's a Facebook group for backpackers and travelers. Follow these, watch the chat, and you'll quickly find where everyone is gathering.
- **Hostel Reception Staff:** Making friends with the hostel reception staff is like making friends with the bartender. If you know the bartender, you'll meet everyone you need to. Same with hostel staff.

How will I stay connected (Wifi, cell phone service, etc.)

In this connected world, knowing how you'll *stay* connected is an understandable concern. Also, having a constant connection is partly why we don't need to lug around hardcopy guidebooks anymore.

To stay connected while traveling, either **get a local sim card at the airport, on arrival, or signup for Google Fi** for cheap and constant coverage abroad.

Both of these options will keep you connected for the duration of your trip.

Learn more in this [Complete Guide to Staying Connected Abroad](#)

DID YOU LOVE THIS? MORE COMING...

The Trails | Financing the Escape

THE TRAILS: A GUIDE TO BACKPACKING THE WORLD

Was this a pleasing read for you? Do we have you craving more of the trails and the micro-trails? Or perhaps you are salivating to start your own adventure.

Would you like more?

Well, don't worry, we won't leave you hanging.

This guide was the first step in a two-part project on "The Trails" and Financing the Escape.

The Books: The Trails & Financing the Escape & Planning Your Escape

A Brother Abroad will complete and publish the full guide to the trails in late 2020 to deliver all of the information you need to travel the world as a modern backpacker in the upcoming book "The Trails."

Additionally, we'll be releasing our prep book, "Financing the Escape," all about planning your life for and saving the cash for your dream trip, whether its two weeks, two months, or two years on the road. If you decide to take it one step further and go full ex-pat or digital nomad (like me), Financing the Escape will deliver everything you need to know.

Planning Your Escape

Last, if you want all of this info in an easy to digest package, our full course "Planning the Escape" is on the horizon. Videos, podcasts, and tutorials that help you in all things travel – planning, itineraries around the globe, backpacking as efficiently as possible, saving for travel, and (the biggest one) planning a life of indefinite travel.

If you're interested in hearing about updates or beta testing our books and coming course for free, email Carlos@ABrotherAbroad.com and we'll get you on the list.

We're honored to have helped you. See you on the trails!

COMING SOON

- **A Full Guide to The Trails**
 - **The Banana Pancake Trail: A Complete Guide**
 - **The Gringo Trail: A Complete Guide**
 - **The Balkan Walk: A Complete Guide**
 - **The Arabian Trail: A Complete Guide**
 - **The Maya Trail: A Complete Guide**
- **Financing the Escape: A guide to planning for your next gap year, mini-retirement, and RTW trip**

If you would like a draft copy of these books to review, feel free to contact me at Carlos@ABrotherAbroad.com