

square mile
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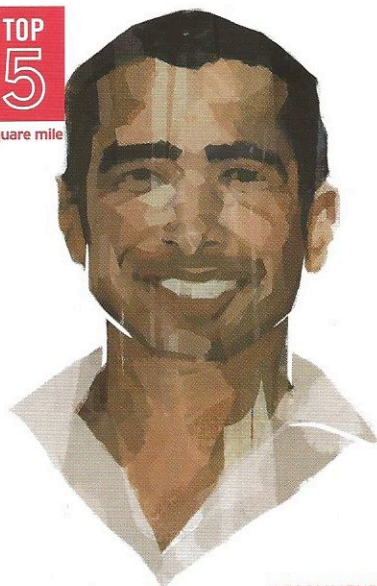
DIRECTORY

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TOP
5
square mile



RECOMMENDS

JAMES GRACE-JAYASUNDERA

Grace-Jayasundera set up Asia travel specialist Ampersand Travel 10 years ago. He dips into his knowledge of the region to find five breathtaking trips.

1 ADVENTURE AND CULTURE: JODHPUR, INDIA

Want a dose of extreme adrenaline with your history lesson? Try zip-lining over Jodhpur's Mehrangarh Fort in true Batman style (Batman buffs may recognise it as the setting for scenes of the new film). Built in the 17th century by Maharaja Jaswant Singh, the fort is 400ft high, and zipping across each of the six wire routes provides dramatic views of its ruins. With

emerald green moats beneath you and the blue-walled city in the distance, this cutting-edge activity is perfect for daredevil sightseers, and one of the highlights of visiting Rajasthan. You'll be strapped into your harness told to keep your head to one side of the wire and pull your knees up towards your chest. Those that don't may end up in a spin or lose momentum, which will leave you dangling mid-line. But don't worry, it's possible to haul yourself along the line towards the ramp – mildly humiliating, but good amusement for everyone else. For a slower but still thrilling way to see the 'Blue City', jump in a hot air balloon at sunset and capture some eagle-eyed photographs.

2 LUXURY SURFING: SUMBA ISLAND, INDONESIA

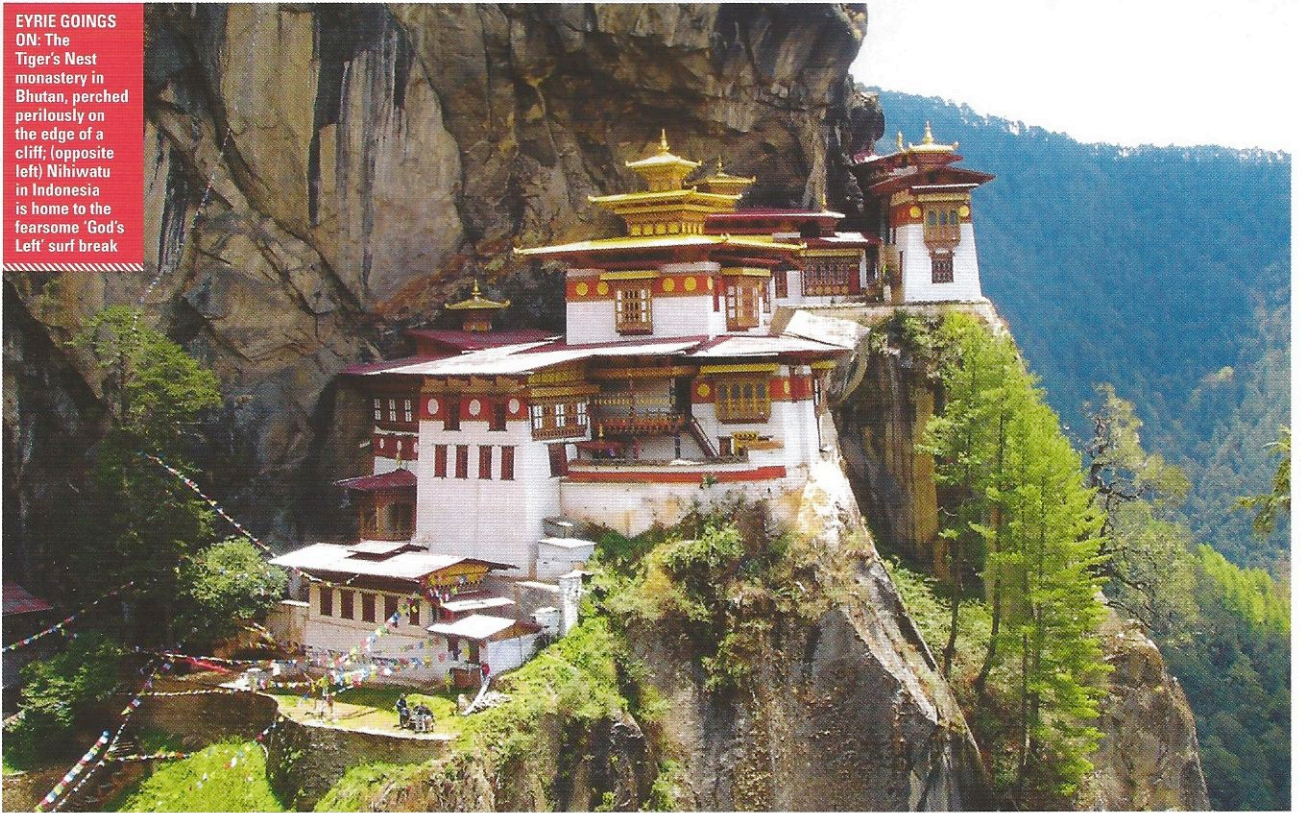
For Asia's sexiest swells, head to Nihiwatu Lodge on Sumba Island – an exclusive retreat with fabled sky-high waves for surfers. A Spice Island first mentioned in the 16th century by a travelling companion of Magellan, Sumba is one of Indonesia's most unexplored islands, located a two-hour flight southeast of Bali. Nihiwatu has been featured in several surf movies. 'God's Left' is the main attraction: these left breaking waves reel for over 300 metres and crest off the resort's outstretched reef, reserved for a maximum of nine surfers at a time. The surf is good at 2ft all the way up to 10ft, and is consistent all year round. Non-surfers will be perfectly pampered, too. Nihiwatu has just ten thatched-roofed villas fronted by a 2.5 mile scoop of sand and backed by 175 hectares of lush jungle and rice terraces. Colourful coral and marine life makes for sensational scuba diving and snorkelling, or you can go on forest treks and village excursions – traditional animist communities and Stone Age sites have remained unchanged here for centuries.

3 PIONEERING TRAVEL: BAGAN, BURMA

For an Indiana Jones-style adventure, head off the beaten track for a spot of temple hunting. Less famous but possibly even more spectacular than Cambodia's Angkor Wat, Burma's Bagan plains are an undiscovered treasure strewn with over 3,000 gold-clad stupas, shrines and ruins. Close to a thousand years ago, Anawrahta, king of the first Myanmar Empire and a staunch advocate of Theravada Buddhism, embarked on one of the most ambitious religious construction programs in history in his kingdom's capital, Bagan. It is a mesmerising moment when you first set eyes on so many ancient temples peeking out from this vast, savannah-like horizon stretching as far as the Irrawaddy River; some are gnarled by jungle, but most



EYRIE GOINGS ON: The Tiger's Nest monastery in Bhutan, perched perilously on the edge of a cliff; (opposite left) Nihiwatu in Indonesia is home to the fearsome 'God's Left' surf break



are untouched. To fully get to grips with the scale of this historical site, take a balloon ride, or if you prefer to stay grounded, hop on a bicycle at dawn to have the plains to yourself. If you get too tempted out, head to the coast to experience one of Asia's best secret beaches: the palm-fringed and footprint-free sands of Ngapali and its delightfully quirky resort, Sandoway. Tourism has only recently opened up in Burma, so inquisitive adventurers should go now to experience it ahead of the crowds.

4 WILDLIFE SPOTTING: SRI LANKA'S SOUTH COAST

The tear drop-shaped island of Sri Lanka is a bountiful Page 3 stunner of a nation, spilling over with natural wonders – from the 2,500m peaks in her interior to the long flat panoramas of Yala and the curvaceous caramel sands of the south coast. Base yourself at the Amanwella in Tangalle, a super slick, James Bond-esque resort on one of the island's most beautiful beaches. You'll be near the 17th century Dutch walled fort town of Galle (described by some as the St Tropez of Asia) as well as Yala National Park, one of the best wildlife destinations outside of Africa. Here you can explore the park by open-back jeep

safari accompanied by an expert guide and an enchanting chorus of tropical birdlife. You may meet with elephants, monkeys, crocodiles, buffalo, bears and, most excitingly, the elusive leopard – more leopards pad through this park per square metre than anywhere else on earth. Just offshore you can take a boat safari to spot blue whales and sperm whales – there's no better place on earth to spot both at the same time. If you're lucky, you may be escorted by a pod of friendly dolphins – up to 300 of them can be spotted racing through these waters.

5 HIGH-ALTITUDE ROMANCE: PUNAKHA, BHUTAN

Love and happiness abound in this magical Himalayan kingdom, ranked No 1 in the world for Gross National Happiness. The scenery is truly soul-stirring – mountains are blanketed in evergreen forests and dotted with Buddhist temples; monasteries cling to cliffs (the Tiger's Nest Monastery does so most dramatically); valleys are sliced by glacial rivers and the air is delicious and clean. It's a bit like Switzerland, but with dzongs and prayer wheels in place of churches. Dressed in their colourful national costume, the Bhutanese are incredibly charming and quick to laugh. They have a

lust for life, evident by their unique style of decorative painting: enormous erect penises can be seen painted on the walls of houses to drive away evil spirits. If that's not enough to put you in the mood for romance, the luxury lodges will. COMO Hotel's brand new 11-room Uma Punakha is particularly suited to sporty couples who like yoga, hiking and mountain biking, and there's an incredible spa to return to afterwards (hot stone massages work wonders on achy bones). Visit in spring when the rhododendrons are in bloom, or in winter when the landscape is dusted with snow.

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