

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

SOUTHEAST ASIA

NOVEMBER 2019

Time travel in TIBET

INSIDER'S
GUIDE TO
INSTAGRAM

TAIWAN'S
HOT SPRINGS

PLUS
PENANG
BACOLOD
SIEM REAP
FIJI AND TONGA

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Spring Break

Baring it all at Hoshinoya's newest resort in the Taiwanese hot-spring town of Guguan. Story and
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS SCHALKX

Mountain views
meet mineral
springs in Taiwan's
leafy heartland.

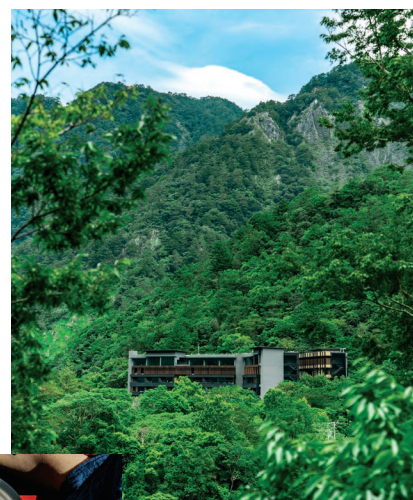
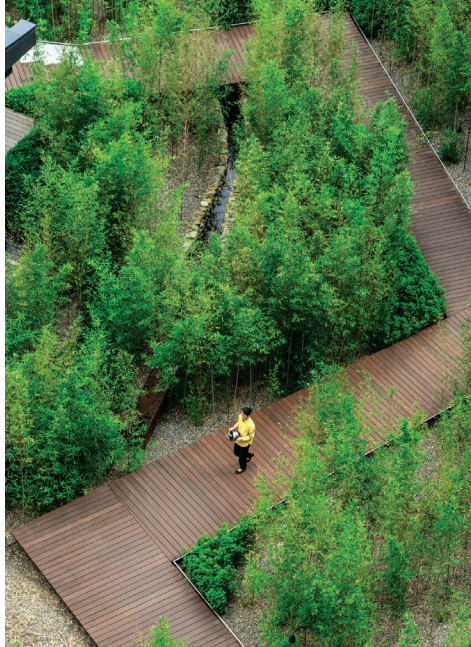
NOTHING BUT A TINY cotton towel protects my modesty at the steaming pool I'm about to enter. I may be in Taiwan, where hot-spring outings are usually swimwear-friendly family affairs, but here in the baths of Hoshinoya Guguan, tradition dictates I *onsen* the Japanese way: in my birthday suit.

My initial awkwardness melts away the moment I submerge into the cypress-fringed outdoor bath. Fed by streams flowing down the craggy peak of Xueshan, East Asia's second-highest mountain, its water is slightly alkaline and on the pleasant side of piping hot, making it the perfect introductory *onsen* for a novice like me.

Opened in June, **Hoshinoya Guguan** (hoshinoya.com; doubles from NT\$7,560) is the luxury resort chain's first foray into Taiwan, and only its second resort outside of Japan, where founder Kuniji Hoshino opened his first *ryokan* in Nagano Prefecture in 1914. Its setting on a forested plateau in Guguan, a tiny hot-spring enclave in the island's mountainous heartland 90 minutes west of Taichung, taps directly into the liquid treasure.

"The qi is particularly good here," says the brand's global wellness manager, Keiko Watanabe, as we stroll through the resort's verdant gardens. "The wind, the water — everything flows so naturally." Qi, the Chinese concept of energy flow, informs both the resort's wellness program and its design — from the garden, where wooden pathways zigzag through swaying bamboo forest and babbling canals swirl around Chinese firs and Formosan gum trees (some of which date back to Japanese colonial times), to the *kaze no ma*, a communal lounge on the fifth floor, optimally positioned to catch the sunlight and the crisp mountain air.

My room, too, is designed with qi in mind, laid out over two floors, with a bedroom and lounge on the bottom and an *onsen* area on top. The focal point is an indoor-outdoor



FROM TOP: Zigzagging through the gardens; an elevated spot on Xueshan's slopes; Taiwanese-style congee; rooms are designed for quiet relaxation.

stone bath endlessly fed by Xueshan's hot springs, and refreshed by a forest breeze. In a palette of muted greys and browns, interiors reflect the clean, functional shapes characteristic of Japanese Zen design. Every piece of furniture (comfy futons and low-slung daybeds among them) faces floor-to-ceiling windows that frame valley views in countless shades of green.

As the sun begins to set and the humming of cicadas fills the air, I set off to the resort's restaurant, following twists and turns through the garden, past a shimmering pool and gazebos lit up with lanterns resembling fireflies. The dining room features both Western-style seating and Japanese-style sunken dining booths, *horigotatsu*, the latter offering the best views of the garden. I opt for the eight-course *kaiseki* meal, a delicate pairing of Taiwanese





FROM TOP: *Kaiseki* morsels arrive on delicate ceramics; the outlook here is always green.



bounty and Japanese cooking techniques, dished up by executive chef Shunsuke Fujii on a plethora of tiny colorful ceramics. Highlights include sea bream sashimi with kumquat-infused salt, and grilled Taiwanese grouper marinated in soy sauce, *mirin* and sake.

The following day I loll around the resort's pool and follow an in-again, out-again routine at my private *onsen*. No tiny towels and curious glances here. Come nightfall, I slip into a navy-colored *yukata* and traditional wooden *geta* shoes to meet Ms. Watanabe again—this time for an *onsen* masterclass in the spa's lobby lounge. Turns out that my method of hastily washing

myself then soaking in hot water until my fingertips turn into raisins is all wrong. She tells me not to just jump straight in, but to first splash myself 10 to 20 times to let my skin react to the minerals. She also teaches me gentle stretches and breathwork for when I'm submerged. "Bathing is a kind of exercise," she explains. "The warm water can work wonders on your skin and muscles."

The masterclass is followed by a massage at the spa, where two of the four *shoji* paper-screened treatment rooms come with private *onsen* pools facing a mountainscape that's now shrouded in clouds. I don't tell my masseuse about my hike—or attempted hike—along the 90-minute uphill Shao Lai hiking trail I'd tried earlier that day, but my weary calves give it away. It's nothing she can't fix with a combination of Chinese and European massage techniques.

As the weekend comes to a close, I ignore Ms. Watanabe's teachings and take one last way-too-long soak on my balcony. Frets of work and deadlines evaporate with every billow of steam. I've spent numerous weekends at my in-laws' summer home not far from here, quietly pleading with my wife if we could *please* go home already. This time, however, I dread the thought of heading back to the city. ☹️

THREE MORE HOT-SPRING RESORTS IN TAIWAN

The hills are alive with the bubbling of hot springs. Here are some other chill spots for soaking.

Volando Urai Spring Spa & Resort

This Relais & Châteaux hot-spring resort in mountainous Wulai is among Taiwan's most renowned. You're spoiled for bathing options, with a public bathhouse, indoor hot and cold baths and a private tub in every guestroom. Sidled up

along the Nanshi River just a half-hour from Taipei, Volando Urai promises a regenerative, close-to-nature experience, with practically every space drenched in forest views. Dining comes in the form of French and Italian food highlighting fresh native ingredients. volandospringpark.com; doubles from NT\$16,000.

Hotel Royal Beitou

Located in Taipei's Beitou district—another area famed for its springs—this holistic-healing retreat's spa, fitness, hydrotherapy and nutrition

programs complement the health benefits of 45-degree-Celsius white-sulfur spring-water baths. All guestrooms come with a yoga mat, aromatic plants, organic bath amenities and a private bath with sound system for a multi-sensory experience. Preventive medicine and the odd cosmetic treatment are also available onsite at Beitou Health Management Hospital. hotelroyal.com.tw/beitou/en; doubles from NT\$11,999.

Yamagata Kaku Hotel & Spa

The Jiaoxi Township brand of spring water is clear,

carbonated and sulfur smell-free. Mineral-rich and alkaline, it's fabled for its beautifying properties, and is said to leave the skin supple and smooth. Yamagata Kaku Hotel & Spa lets you tap into this fountain of youth with modern, Zen-calm rooms within walking distance of the entrance of Jiaoxi Hot Spring Park. Soak in public baths in the park, in the communal baths on the top floor of the hotel, or in your room's own deep, stone tub. yamagatakaku.com.tw; doubles from NT\$16,000.

—RANDY MULYANTO and BEK VAN VLIET

NOVEMBER 2019

UPGRADE

PUT YOURSELF IN THE PICTURE: HOLIDAYS MADE BY INSTAGRAM

#travelgram

Sleuth your way through the crazy-popular photo-sharing app to Insta-plan your next, best vacation.

BY CHRIS SCHALKX.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY WASINEE CHANTAKORN

It's painfully easy to waste hours scrolling through whimsical sunset shots and artfully plated dishes on Instagram. How about turning this time into a productive trip-planning sesh instead? With more than a billion users from every corner of the globe, no other platform harbors such a wealth of hyper-local and real-time travel information. You need to know how to cut through the selfies and #OutfitOfTheDay nonsense, but once you do you'll be swimming in the insider intel that traditional guidebooks—and even on-the-ground blogs—are missing.



We've picked out some of our favorite Instagrammers around Asia and asked them to share the best insider tips from their timelines.



@samishome

Hong Kong

"When in Hong Kong, seek out its typical local cafés (*cha chaan teng*). Matchbox Café in Causeway Bay harkens back to the 60s–70s and is outfitted in retro interiors and fake minibus booths. Order the *char siu* pork macaroni soup!"

BEFORE YOU GO

1. Hunt for Hashtags

Instagram's search engine isn't the most robust, but with a little creativity, you can surface relevant posts through hashtags. Be specific, though; a search for #bangkok returns sexy selfies, handbag advertisements and blurry food shots, but look up #bangkokbrunch, and you'll discover tucked-away coffee shops and the best addresses for avocado toast.



■ Tap the magnifying glass at the bottom of the Instagram app to open the "search" page. Type your search query (e.g. **#saigon**) then hit TAGS. You'll be presented with a list of hashtags. Tap one and posts with that hashtag will appear under two tabs; TOP (the most-liked posts) and RECENT.

■ Once you've uncovered useful hashtags, you can "follow" them, so that the hashtag's top results show up in your Instagram feed.

■ Play around with prefixes and affixes to find exactly what you're looking for. Always include the name of your destination. The search page will come up with suggestions and predictions based on what you type, giving you even more ideas. Some tried-and-tested examples:

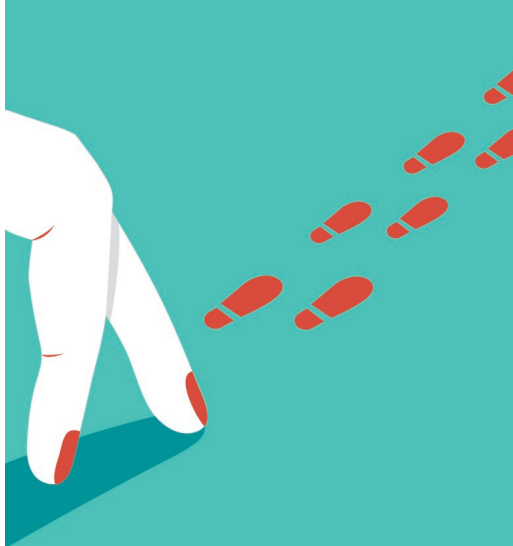
Cafés—**#cafehopping[city]**

Food ideas—**#[city]foodie**

Scenic spots —**#adayin[city]**

Tourist sites—**#discover[city]**

Activities—**#thingstodo[city]**



2. Follow the Locals

Instagram has spawned a legion of local ambassadors who proudly share their hometown. They're often the best source for insider intel: new bars, off-the-beaten-path markets and local street-food carts.

■ Start by using the search engine to look up travel-related pages that crowdsource their content. Usually, tourism boards (@[visit_singapore](#), @[vietnamtourismboard](#)), travel media (@[travelandleisureasia](#)), or unofficial fan accounts (@[webangkok](#), @[hongkonginsta](#)) are good starting points. Just typing a city's name will usually result in a list of useful pages to start with. In many cases, a blue checkmark indicates it's an official account.

■ When you see a shot you like, tap through to the profile of the source (usually mentioned in the caption, or tagged in the picture itself) to find what else they've been sharing.

■ Some cities might not have an active tourism board or fan page. But searching for hashtags like #[\[city\]insider](#), #[\[city\]blogger](#), or #[\[city\]life](#) often yields good results too.

3. Or the Jet-Setting Tastemakers

Let's face it: Some people just travel better. Always on the move, perpetually at the newest bars, best boutique hotels and hippest galleries whether in Mumbai or Tokyo. And lucky for us, many of them love sharing their whereabouts. Steer clear of the million-or-so-follower influencers whose pictures only involve themselves draped over the ledge of an infinity pool somewhere tropical, bank-breaking and sponsored. Instead, hunt for those sharing the interesting bits of a destination.

■ If you're a food-focused traveler, use Instagram's search engine to look up profiles of globetrotting chefs (@[pawkhrua](#), @[andrechiang_sg](#), @[chefjoseandres](#)) or food writers (@[francis_lam](#), @[kat_odell](#)) who usually eat at the most interesting restaurants—or street joints. Design buffs should seek out traveling architects, designers and other creatives (@[kellywearstler](#), @[jj.acuna](#), @[serendella](#)) as they often have a penchant for finding a place's prettiest spots.

■ Stuck for inspiration? Browsing through the bylines in your favorite travel, design or food magazines, and then looking them up on Instagram is a good start.

■ Once you've discovered a page you like, tap SUGGESTED FOR YOU under their profile (hit the downward arrow next to MESSAGE) and swipe across for similar pages.

Better yet, some Instagrammers make it easy to discover their tips by neatly grouping them in Stories Highlights on their profile. For example, @[taiwanwalker](#) is a foodie tour guide who pins her top food recommendations from Tainan to Kyushu with clear city labels. Others, like travel journalist Gloria Chung of @[foodandtravelhk](#), label their top tips with city-specific, easy-to-find hashtags like #[foodandtravelSeoul](#) and #[foodandtravelBrisbane](#), helping their followers create instant city guides in a jiffy.



THE
INSIDERS

@[foodsaketokyo](#)—Tokyo

"Shinjuku Sanchoime is filled with casual *izakaya*. Start off at Saiseisakaba with grilled skewers and *onigiri*, then continue the evening in the area."



4. Reverse-Engineer Itineraries

Why reinvent the wheel? Benefit from the research previous travelers have already conducted by reverse-engineering their itineraries through their Instagram posts.

■ Find someone with a similar travel style by clicking on a post of a venue you want to visit. Under the business name will be the location in smaller type. Tap it and the “location” page will open, with public posts of everyone who has checked in here.

■ Now, tap on a user and scope out their profile to see where else they’ve checked in. The more niche your starting point, the better: just about every tourist will check-in at Victoria

Peak, but only those in the know will check-in at Asia Society’s equally photo-worthy rooftop garden. The latter are more likely to have shared other under-the-radar spots worth checking out.

■ This is a great technique to scout out interesting local Instagrammers, too: start off at a neighborhood diner or a non-touristy café, and tap through to its location page to see which locals have checked in there.

5. Just Ask!

Something you still don’t know? Chances are, some of your followers have been there before. Since not every part of one’s trip—even if they’re highlights—ends up on Instagram, it usually pays to ask for recommendations.

■ Put up a simple Instagram Story (with or without a “Q+A sticker”) or a post announcing that you’re planning a trip somewhere with a request for tips. Be specific: if you’re looking for vegan restaurants, make it clear in order to avoid a barrage of useless (but well-intentioned) advice.

■ For the best results, make sure your profile is set to public. Add a few relevant hashtags to your post or story to be discovered by more users outside of your network who could offer tips. Adding the geotag of the city you’re visiting is a good idea, too.

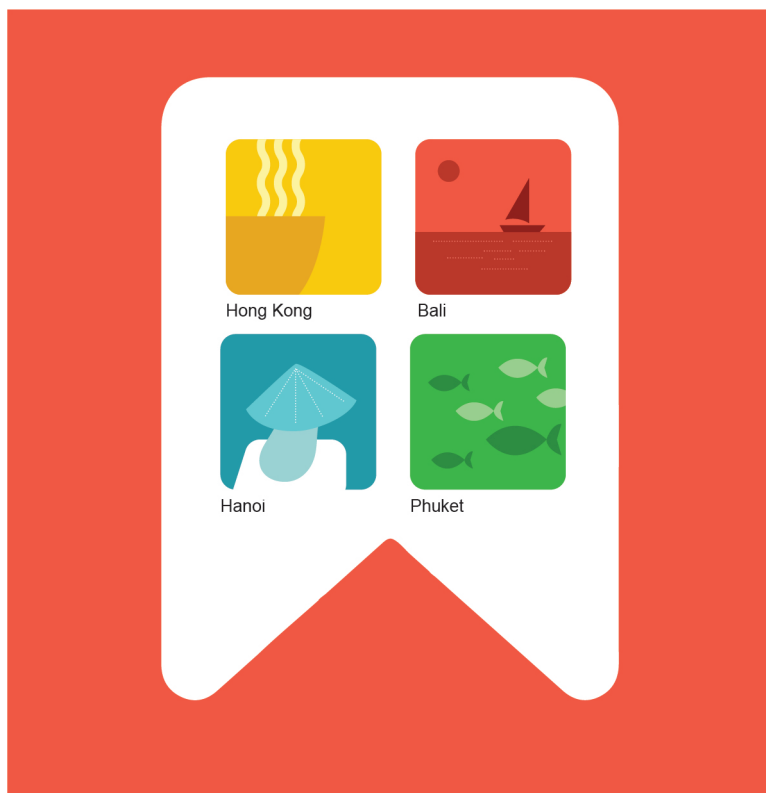
■ Also “@” mention your destination’s official tourism board if they’re on Instagram—who knows the cool stuff they can help with!



THE
INSIDERS

@ieatishootipost—Singapore

“This stall at Chinatown Complex Food Centre in Singapore serves the most traditional *cendol*. Everything is still made by hand, and a bowl of this sweet treat costs only S\$2!”




6. Get Organized

The Instagram app allows you to “bookmark” other peoples’ Instagram posts in a private collection, helping you easily reference them again later. Instagram’s “saved posts” interface lets you categorize your bookmarks in “collections.” Here’s where things get interesting: you can create as many collections as you’d like, making it a powerful tool to organize travel tips.

- To save a post, tap the little bookmark icon below the post you’d like to save. A single tap will send it directly to your “saved posts” folder for you to access at a later date.
- Tap the bookmark button a little longer, and you will be prompted to save it to a specific collection. Add your post to an existing collection, or create a new collection from scratch by adding a title.
- To keep things neatly organized, create a separate

collection for each upcoming trip, or divide it even further into collections for restaurants, hotels and in-the-know Instagrammers in places you’re planning to hit up. As the word-count for collection titles is limited, using emojis (flags, food) can help you save space, and make the different collections instantly recognizable.

- Once you get to the actual trip planning, you have a useful list of interesting places at the ready. Plot them on Google Maps, and you’re good to go.

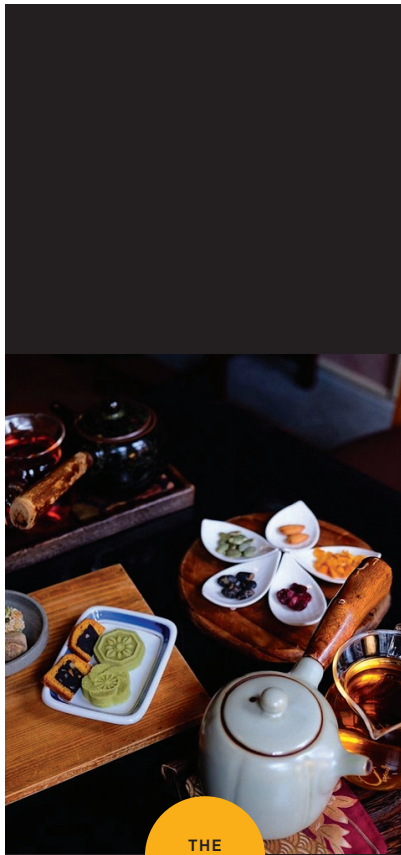


THE INSIDERS

@wearekinkin

Bangkok

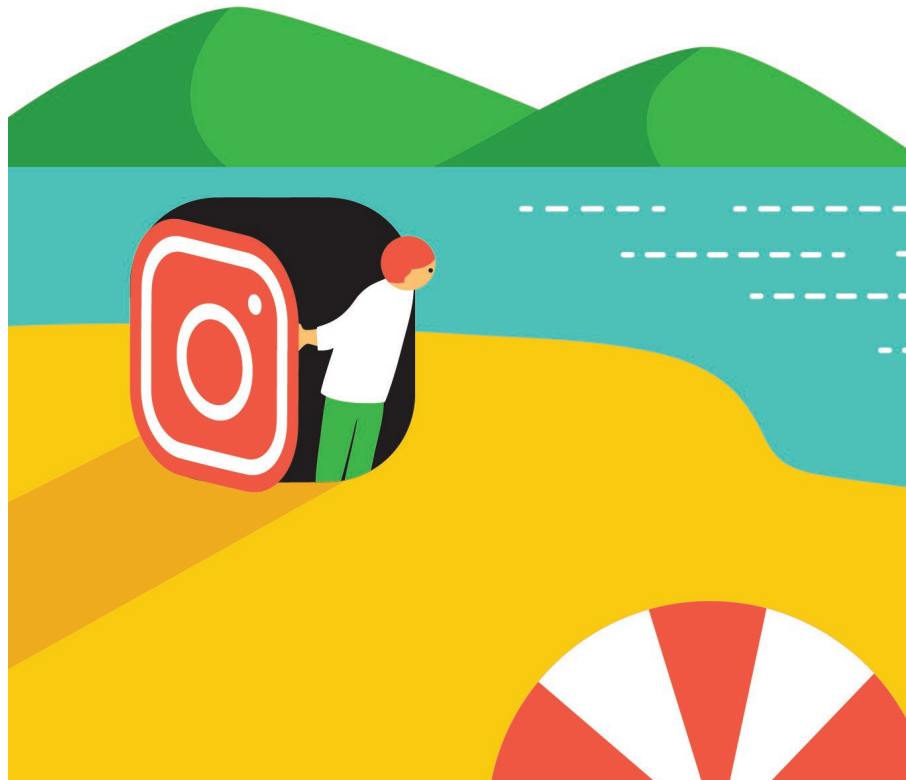
“For top-notch Thai-Chinese food, don’t just stick to Yaowarat (like all the guidebooks tell you). Instead, we point our friends to Chokdee Kao Mun Kai, a hole-in-the-wall in Samsen. Don’t miss their signature goat stew and stir-fried bitter melon with egg!”



THE
INSIDERS

@taipeifoodie — Taipei

"A visit to Taipei isn't complete without dropping by one of its many teahouses. Located on historic Dihua Street, South Street Delight Tea House is a favorite of mine. The old-timey interior is very photogenic."



ON THE GROUND

Get the Lay of the Land

Thanks to Instagram's geotag search function, you can have complete strangers do a recce before your trip to a certain spot. A browse through the photos that earlier visitors have posted at a location gains you the kind of intel you usually won't find on a brand's website or in travel guides. Use it to learn about dress codes at restaurants (are people in the pictures decked out to the nines, or more casual?), family-friendliness of hotels (do you see lots of kids in pictures?), or general accessibility of a place (are tables spaced far enough apart for a wheelchair user to pass through?). A browse through these geotagged pictures also gives you objective insight into a venue, untainted by the highly stylized brand images or press shots you'll find on the brand's own channels.

Feast Hungry Eyes

Some dishes sound great written out, but are a letdown in reality. Then there are those gastronomic terms (*escabeche*? *involtini*?) you're too embarrassed to ask about. Local joints might have no menu at all or nothing in English. Instagram, yet again, to the rescue. Find the restaurant's location page or its profile and tap through to the posts it's tagged in to get an overview of what folks are eating. Spot the must-order dishes and even turn your phone into a pick-and-point menu that can break any language barrier.

Find Real- Time Info

Instagram Stories, the snappy, full-screen updates accessed



through the bubbles on top of the Instagram app, are often a great source of real-time information. Contrary to regular posts, which are often heavily retouched and/or published days after the photo was taken, Instagram Stories are usually unfiltered and posted on the spur of the moment. Browse to a location page, and tap the rainbow-bordered bubble to see Instagram Stories posted from here within the last 24 hours (the lifespan of a Stories update).

Use it for crowd-sourced weather forecasts, or to get a feel of how busy a foodie hotspot will be during lunch or dinnertime. It's also a fail-safe way to find out if a venue is actually open: published opening times aren't always up-to-date, public holidays could affect them, and not every establishment—especially mom-and-pops—has a contact number. If you see that guests have checked in within the past hour, chances are high you're not going to encounter closed doors.

Stay Inspired

Stuck for photo inspiration? A quick scroll through the pictures snapped by visitors before you will help get your creative juices flowing. Use the location page to see what angles and subjects other photographers are using to capture the place—whether it's a photo-worthy vantage point or a backdrop for the perfect selfie. This will often also uncover hidden corners of a place you might not have found by simply walking around. Serious shutterbugs can take their Instagram game up a notch by joining forces with a seasoned photographer. Some hotels, such

as **@mo_singapore** (Mandarin Oriental Singapore's Instagram Your Way through Marina Bay package) and **@capellashanghai** (Capella Shanghai's Point, Shoot, Retouch experience) offer activities and deals that include tours with professional photographers and influencers, showing you the city's prettiest corners and sharing the tricks of the trade.

Follow Your Favorites

Every hotel, bar and restaurant worth patronizing has a presence on Instagram these days. By following the accounts of businesses you're planning to visit, you will be the first to know about events, specials and promotions—which often don't get communicated on websites. **@potatoheadbali** announces their guest DJs via their Instagram; **@canvasbkk** shares their weekly specials with a photo on their timeline. If you have specific questions (or want to make a reservation), getting in touch through Instagram direct message can be much quicker than reaching out via e-mail.

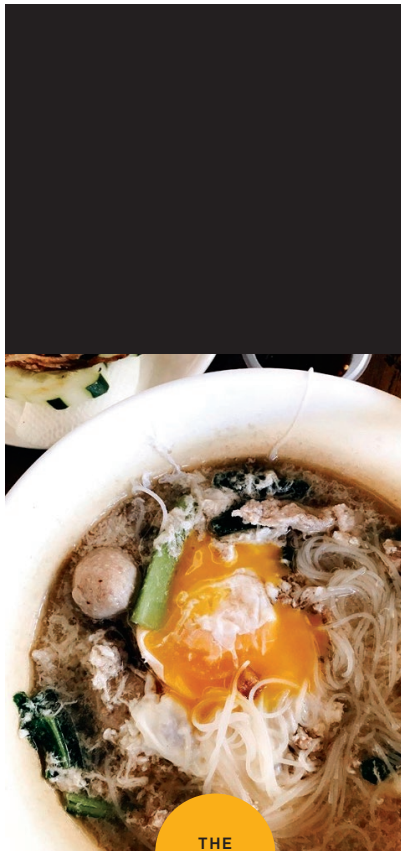


THE
INSIDERS

@lineshapecolour

Saigon

"With its vibrant markets, ancient pagodas and amazing food, Saigon's District 5 is one of my favorite areas. So full of character and lots of color!"

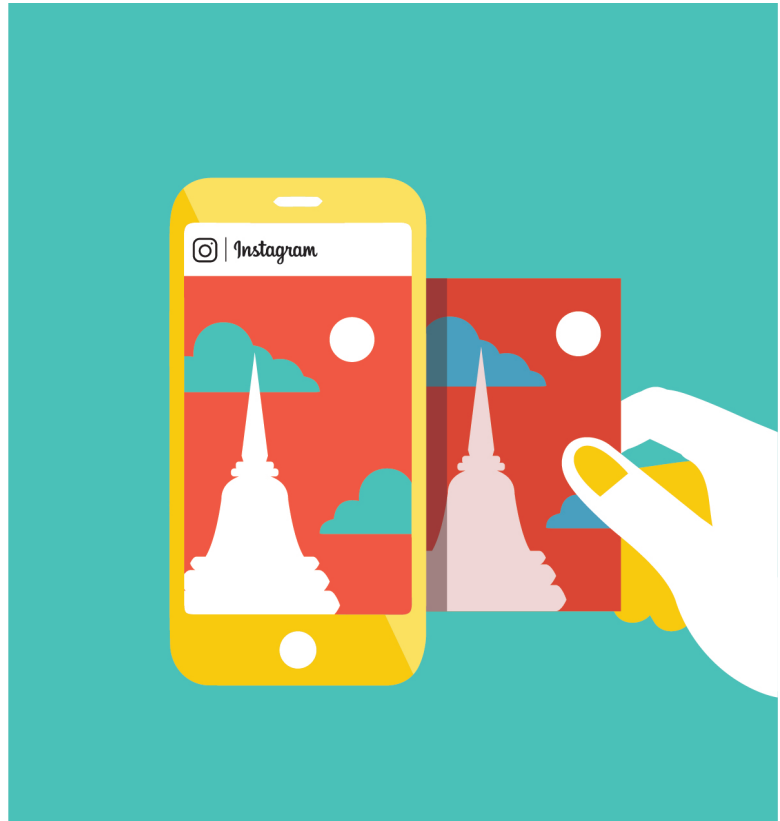


THE
INSIDERS

@euniceeunny — Kuala Lumpur

"KL locals really, really love their pork noodles. On my mission to hunt down the best bowl in Klang Valley (I have more than 100 spots saved!), Kedai Kopi Wah Cheong does one of the best versions.

POST-TRIP TIPS



Create a Keepsake

Having a recap of a trip on your Instagram timeline is great (and useful to keep a record of the places you've been), but nothing beats reminiscing about past holidays with tangible keepsakes in hand. Services such as **@artifactuprising's** "Instagram Friendly Books" make designing and printing holiday photo albums as easy as logging in on your Instagram account and picking the photos you'd like to include. And then there's always the good ol' postcard: Apps like **@postagram** will print and send customizable postcards using your favorite Instagram snaps.

Pay it Back

Instagram as a travel guide is only as good as its users make it. It's good to give back so that others can benefit from your experiences (and to help ensure that lovely, family-run restaurant you shared receives a little more patronage). Make it easy for other travelers to discover your posts by adding an accurate geotag, and always add a few hashtags to your post description that are indicative of the photo you're sharing.

• • •

Now, put the phone down and actually look at that painting, float in the sea, and, for goodness' sake, eat that dish before it gets cold. +