A scenic landscape featuring a lake, lush green hills, and a village with traditional houses in the foreground. The background shows misty mountains under a cloudy sky.

8 | **ADVENTURE** **DESTINATIONS IN ASIA** **YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF**

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1. Pu Kaeng Waterfall

Country: Thailand

Province: Chiang Rai

Pu Kaeng waterfall is one of my favorite waterfalls in the world let alone Asia. It consists of 7 levels of cascading water over 3 kilometers of trekking. The jungle route will take you through dense overgrown trails which the lack of visitors leave in a natural state.

Pu Kaeng Waterfal is located in the Doi Luang National Parks at the southern end of the Chiang Rai Province. It takes about 1.5 to 2 hours travelling south from Chiang Rai by car, and longer by motorbike. The hike up and down the waterfall trail should deserve at least 3 hours to have the time to really enjoy the jungle surroundings. Reserve a full day for this trip but it could also be matched with a stop off at Wat Rong (White Temple).

Getting There:

From Chiang Rai head south on the main Highway AH2 towards Phayao province. After about 58km along this highway you will pass the town of Phan. Remain on this route until you reach highway kilometer 77 which will be at ban Pu Kaeng. Maek a right turn and follow the small road for another 9 kilometers until you reach the National Park Headquarters.

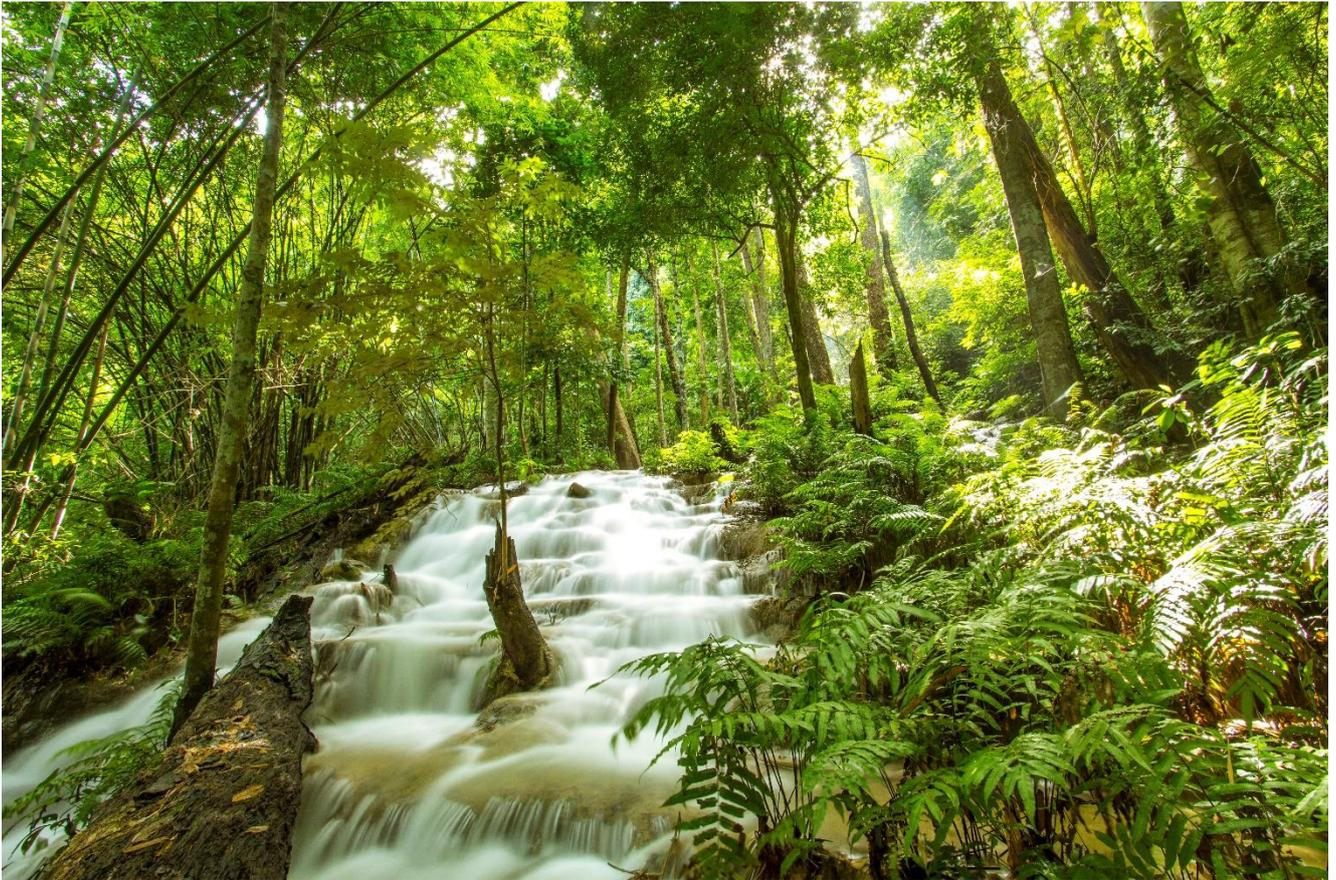
How much does it Cost?

Entry Fee: 300 thai baht for foreigners (standard national park entry fee).

Travel: the price of travel ranges depending on what option you choose. The cheapest method for a group would be to privately hire a Songtaew from Chaing Rai for the day at about 500 Thai Baht. Another option is to hire a motorbike in Chiang Rai for 300 Thai Baht per day and brave the highway.

Above: The last level waterfall accessible along the trail

Below: Small waterfalls along the lower end of the trail.



2. Ban Gioc Waterfall

Country: Vietnam

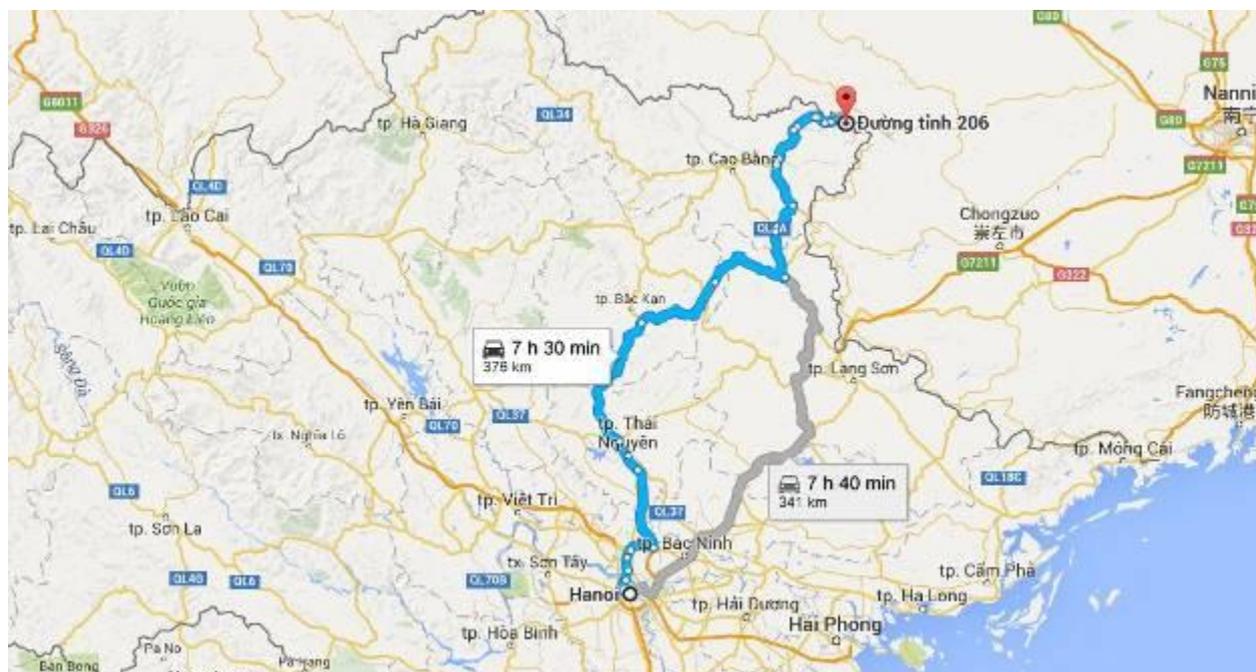
Province: Cao Bang

Ban Gioc waterfall is the most impressive waterfall I have visited in Asia in terms of the huge volume of water spilled every second. The waterfall is part of the Quay Son River which forms the northern Vietnamese border with China. This means that you can actually see Chinese tourists just across the river but not access their side. Don't swim across the river or the Chinese guards might shoot.

Ban Gioc waterfall is roughly a two day ride north east of Hanoi with an overnight stop at Cao Bang. The roads are small and windy, lack street lighting and are full of pot holes. On the contrary they do pass through some beautiful countryside Vietnamese villages with friendly local people and amazing foods.

Getting There:

Ban Gioc waterfall is located 376km North East of Hanoi, therefore it is likely you will be making an overnight stop in Cao Bang. From Cao Bang the waterfall is a further 90km North East through small rural roads, close enough to cover in a day trip there and back. Follow the signs towards the Chinese border until you hear the sound of the crashing water.



Above: The main section of the Ban Gioc Waterfall.

Below: The smaller section of the ban Gioc Waterfall, which becomes one with the larger on a heavy wet season.



3. Muang Ngoy Nuea

Country: Laos

Province:

Muang Ngoy Nuea is definitely one of the more remote and lesser accessible destinations in South East Asia. The quite little village only recently got electricity which is available for just a few hours per day. All the shops in the village close early and silence is requested by about 10pm. However things change at 4am with the sound of boat starting up as the locals wake up to head out fishing on the river.

From Muang Ngoy Nuea you can make a range of one day or multi day treks for 10km or further up the mountains into even more remote jungle villages. Trekking can be done solo without the need for tour packages. There is also the opportunity to do some traditional net fishing in the river with the locals. These fishing trips will take you further upstream through beautiful mountain ranges.

Getting There:

There are no roads to Muang Ngoy Nuea therefore you'll need to take a boat upstream along the Nam Ou River from Nong Khiaw. The boat will take about 1 hour and leaves on the loose schedule of 'when it is full.' From the landing point at Muang Ngoy the main stretch is only a 5 minute walk to the small selection of guesthouses and restaurants.

How much does it Cost?

Transport: The boat Nong Khiaw to Muang Ngoy is 11,000 kip (USD 1.30) walking further into the mountains is free.

Sleep: a typical wooden bungalow guesthouse around the main street will cost between 80,000 to 100,000 kip (USD 10 to 15). Staying overnight in a remote village further up the mountains can be as cheap as 50,000 kip (USD 3 to 5) per person per night.

Above Left: The main route up to the isolated mountain villages from Muang Ngoy Nuea.

Above Right: The launching point for long tail ferry from Nong Khiaw and local fishing boats.

Below: The main road in the town.



4. Nam Roo Hot Spring

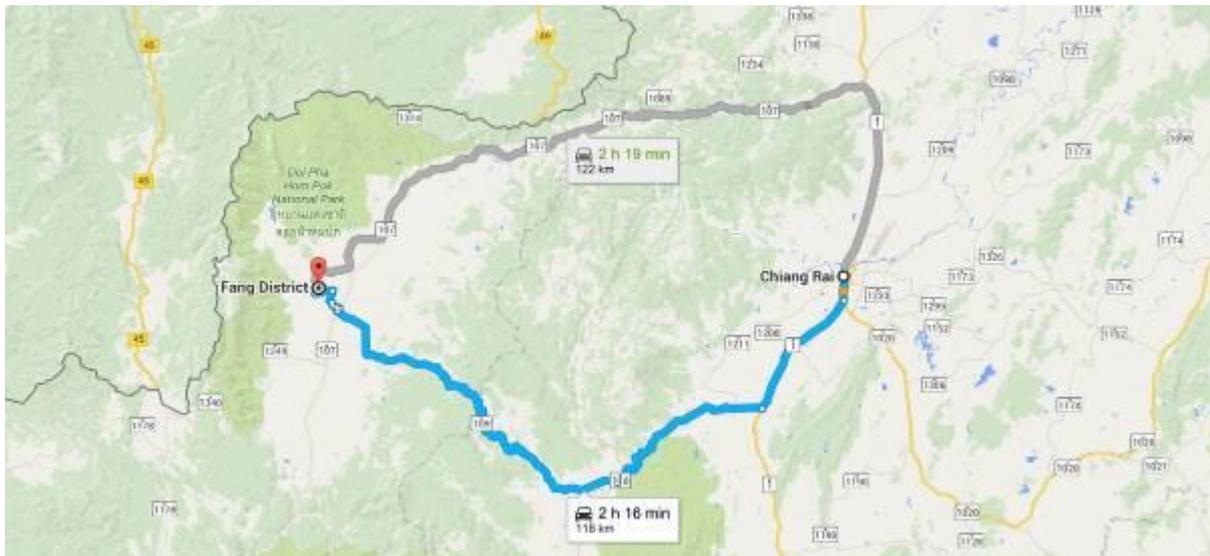
Country: Thailand

Province: Chiang Mai

Nam Roo is a naturally heated vista pool located deep into the forest and far up the mountains in the Doi Pha Hom Pok National Park in the far north of Thailand. The pool runs right up to the edge of a steep mountain slope which suddenly drops off out of view, thus giving the sense of a natural infinity pool looking out at the clouds and the mountain ranges. The roads beyond Nam Roo provide even more stunning views over the mountainous countryside.

Getting There:

Nam Roo is located about 15km outside of the town of Fang, which is a further 120km from the city of Chiang Rai. Head south from Chiang Rai until making a right run onto Highway 118. Continue along Highway 118 for 40km until taking a right turn onto Highway 109 which will continue to Fang District. Nam Roo is a further 15km from Fang along a signposted route.



Sleep:

Recommended Guesthouse: Phumane Lahu Home Hotel – Price Range 500 – 650 Thai Baht per room per night (USD 20 – 30) <http://www.phumaneehotel.com/>

Above: Panoramic views from the vista pool at Nam Roo.

Middle: Beyond Nam Roo into the rural mountains.

Below: Winding Mountain trails beyond Nam Roo.



5. Wenshan Hot Spring

Country: Taiwan

Province: Hualien

This one isn't really South East Asia but had to be included. Wenshan Hot Spring is located within the Taroko Gorge national Park in central Taiwan. Many people have heard of the beautiful Taroko Gorge and decide to tackle it in a day trip as far up the mountain pass as the small village. What is lesser known is the beauty further up into the mountains.

Past the town in Taroko, you'll need to get your hiking boots on as the standard shuttle buses do not travel here. Head further into the park up the main road until reaching a sign for Wenshan Hot Spring. From here you'll have to climb down some steep slippery stairs and rope bridge descending to the bottom of the valley. Alas you will recognize the smell of sulphur and the presence of an unspoken hot spring.

Don't ask the locals about this one, they will look at you like you are crazy and it doesn't exist. Guess they want to keep it a secret too.

Getting There:

From Taipei take a 2 hour express train south east to Hualien city. From Hualien you can either take a taxi into Taroko Gorge National Park or rent a scooter. There are also shuttle buses which run to and from the national Park and stop off at different locations with a one or two day pass. However the shuttle bus will not go as far as the Wenshan Hot Spring.

Note: Hitch hiking also works very well within the National Park!

How much does it Cost?

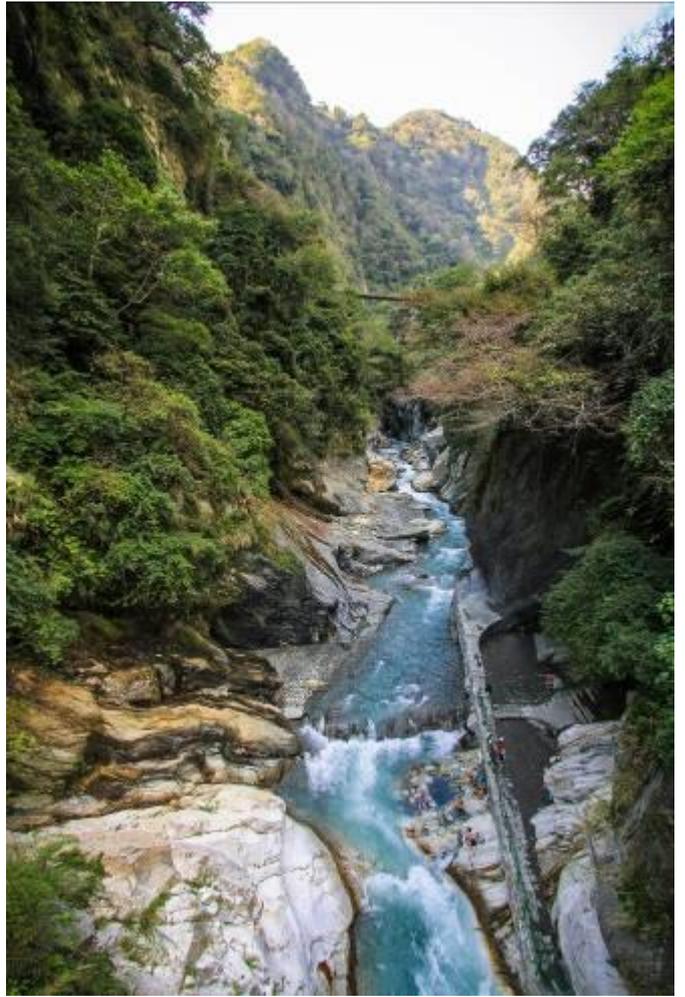
Entry: Entry to Taroko Gorge national Park is free and there is no hidden charge for the hot spring.

Sleep: Accommodation in the park is limited, in the range of USD 10 – 15 per person per night.

Above Left: Walking the mountain pass up to Wenshan Hot Spring.

Above Right: View of the hot spring in the river from the suspension bridge.

Below: Down the bottom of the valley in the river.



6. Ha Giang

Country: Vietnam

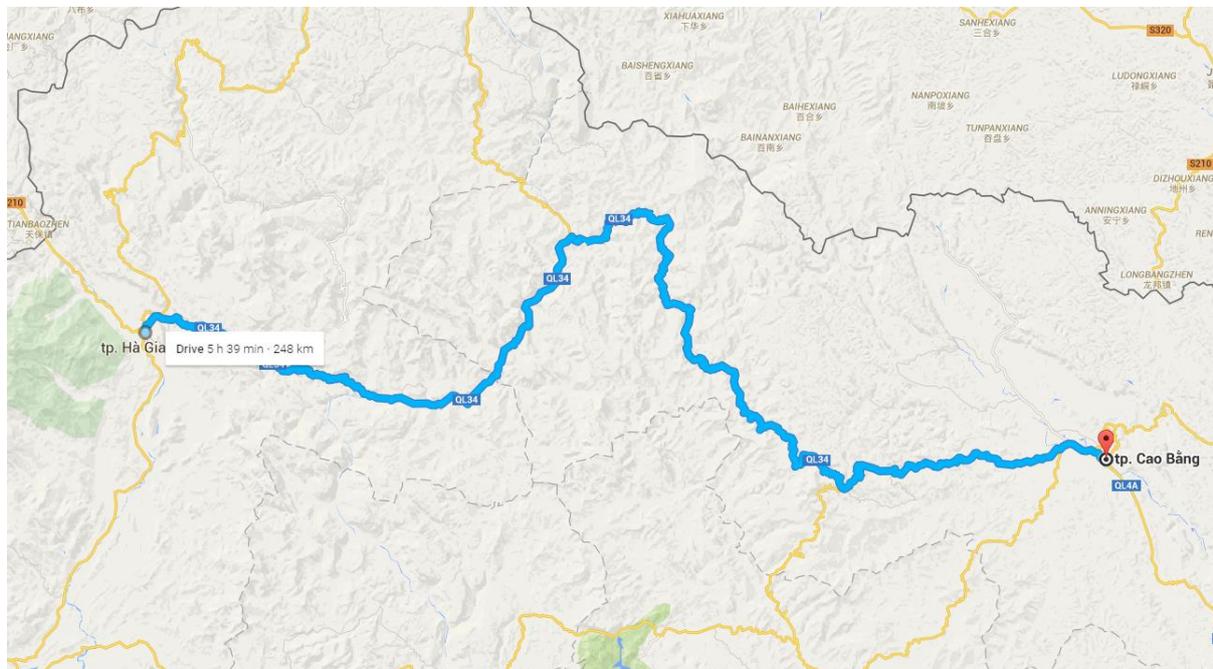
Province:

The road north-west from Cao Bang to Ha Giang is perhaps the road through heaven. On the map this road is also known as Highway QL34, though that name is not so exciting. For any fans of the famous Hai Van Pass winding along the Vietnamese coastline, this road is a must do.

The QL34 to Ha Giang is one of the most beautiful 260km stretches of road in the world, so beautiful in fact that it is dangerous. The road winds far up into the mountains of Vietnam offering views of rice paddies terraced all the way down to the bottom of the valley. Guaranteed you'll be so preoccupied with the view that you will forget to watch where you are going on the road.

Getting There and Costs:

This destination is all about the views from the road, therefore the only way to experience the road to Ha Giang is by motorbike. Best option is to buy yourself a motorbike in Hanoi for USD300 which can be sold on return or at the other end of your journey. Hotels in both HaGiang and Cao Bang are about USD10 per night per room and petrol will set you back another USD10 – 15 for the whole ride.



Above: A slice of the Highway QL34 winding through along the valley of a mountain.

Below: Views of remote villages in the valleys along the Highway QL34.



7. Pulau Pangkor

County: Malaysia

Province:

Almost everyone has heard of Penang and Langkawi, but surprisingly Pulau Pangkor seems rather undisturbed. Located farther down the west coast of Malaysia Pulau Pangkor is located off the coast of Lumut and about 250km north of Kuala Lumpur.

Pulau Pangkor remains primarily a local fishing island. It is also home to an abundance of the unique Hornbill bird, a must see for nature fanatics and features some amazing sunsets. Lacking any major hills, this island is definitely worth exploring for a few days by bicycle.

Getting There:

Take a 3hr bus north from Kuala Lumpur to Lumut where the ferry terminal to the island is located. From Lumut there are ferries departing every 20 minutes from 7am to 8pm for RM10 (USD2.50) round trip ticket.

Sleep:

Most reasonably priced guesthouses and backpackers are located on the west coast of the island on Teluk Nipah Beach.

Above: Sunset over the boats at Teluk Nipah Beach.

Below: Local fisherman on the rocks at the end of Teluk Nipah Beach.



8. Wang Takai Waterfall

Country: Thailand

Province: Nakhon Nayok

Wang Takai is more of a series of river rapids than a crashing waterfall as first comes to mind, however that makes it none the less enjoyable. The river which flows through the forest consists of cool refreshing pools of waist to shoulder deep water, perfect for a swim or laying back on a floating tube.

The park gets a bit busy on weekends with day tripper Thai tourists, but not so busy to feel crowded.

Getting There:

Located in Nakhon Nayok Province about 130km north east of Bangkok, Wang Takai is difficult to access with public transport. Getting your own private wheels such as hiring a car is the best way to get here.



Sleep:

The national park offers camping starting from just 300 Thai Baht per night with tents available for rent. With two days to spare this makes an ideal overnight nature retreat.

Above: sitting in the rapids at water level.

Below: Looking through the forest upstream.

