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## Festival Time: “Step Outside the Ordinary”

written by [Carla Hunt](#) | Posted on July 29th, 2015

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Sapporo Snow Festival in Japan. (Photo courtesy: Super Value Tours)

“There is quite possibly no better way to truly connect with a foreign culture than to join in a local festival,” says Kirsten Louy-Nasty, CEO of Asia Transpacific Journeys, “and Asia’s festivals are as diverse as its landscape—each one a vibrant distillation of a destination’s complex history, culture, art and traditions.” Festivals offer a way of “digging deeper when exploring a country,” Louy-Nasty adds, “although to have a festival makes sense for our luxury small group trips or custom journeys, there must be fine lodgings in the vicinity. But without doubt, attending a festival in Asia gives travelers a chance to step outside the ordinary.”

Whether a festival is religious or secular, whether it marks the birth of a well-loved god or the beginning of the planting or harvest seasons, it’s always an occasion to celebrate for a day or a week, and to re-enact customs that may date back hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Important to know in our sampling of festivals is that the dates often change yearly as Hindus, Muslims and Chinese all follow a lunar calendar.

## India

The bounty of festivals and fairs almost guarantees that at any given time, somewhere in some corner of India, people will dress in new clothes, sing and dance, worship, feast and rejoice, particularly in a country that was the birthplace of two of the world's great religions—Hinduism and Buddhism—and one of its smallest—Jainism. For a sampling of India's festival calendar consider:

**Khajuraho Dance Festival** (late February or early March): Staged in the famous 10th-century Khajuraho temples that are illuminated at dusk, this week-long festival spotlights the immense diversity of Indian dance—no less than eight genres of classical dance and innumerable folk forms—all central to India's culture.

**Snake Boat Races Festival** (August): This annual festival is held on the backwaters at Alappuzha, Kerala on the occasion of the Onam Festival. The giant snake boats—measuring 150 ft. in length, each powered by more than 100 oarsmen, and with singing and whooping war cries—compete for the prestigious Nehru Trophy.

**Diwali Festival** (late October/early November): Diwali, or the Festival of Light, is the most important and happiest festival on the Hindu calendar; countless oil lamps are lit to [welcome](#) home Lord Rama after his 14-year exile.

**Pushkar Cattle Fair** (November): Thousands of people—Rajasthani men and women in their colorful traditional attire, saffron-robed Holy Men, cattle traders, shopkeepers, merchants, dancers, musicians and artisans—congregate at Pushkar for the 4-day event; a cultural, trade and religious celebration, and above all, the world's largest camel fair.

## Malaysia

While Merdeka Square in Kuala Lumpur at midnight is the place to be for Malaysia's National Day on Aug. 31, Malaysia is a potpourri of ethnically diverse people who celebrate their traditions—from Kota Bharu in the north and south to Sarawak, Brunei and Sabah.

**Thaipusam** (falls on a day between Jan. 15 and Feb. 15): Enormous crowds converge at the sacred shrine of the Batu Caves, some joining an 8-hour procession from Kuala Lumpur to the Cave Temple for this dramatic Hindu festival.

**Gawai Dayak Festival** (beginning of June): The Gawai Dayak is celebrated in Sarawak to mark the end of the rice harvesting season. It also marks the beginning of the new planting season. Activities such as dancing, singing and a considerable amount of rice wine drinking take place in the longhouses.

**Dragon Boat Festival** (June): Known as the Chang Festival or Duanwu Festival, it commemorates a Chinese patriot and poet named Qu Yuan. The best place to witness the celebrations on a grand scale is in Penang.

**George Town Festival** (August): This festival is a month-long celebration of the arts in the UNESCO World [Heritage](#) site of George Town, Penang. It showcases an impressive array of local, regional and international acts on a program that showcases over 90 dance, drama, art, music and fashion events.

## Thailand

In a country with 94 percent followers of Buddha, festivals marking religious devotion or the changing of the seasons have long been an integral part of life. The festival calendar is chock-full of national and regional festivities.

**Chiang Mai Flower Festival** (1st weekend of February): When all of the North is in bloom, the town of Chiang Mai springs to life with parades, floral-bedecked floats and beauty contests.

Songkran Festival (mid-April): Basically celebrating the Thai New Year, the central element of this 3-day festival is water throwing—symbolizing cleansing, purifying, and washing away last year's misfortunes, as well as to bring on the rains for rice cultivation. In Bangkok, festivities take place at Sanam Luang, where a revered Buddha image is bathed as part of the merit-making rituals.

Chonburi Buffalo Race (October, day before the full moon): Closely associated with the end of the 3-month Buddhist Lent, the race is held in the country's eastern Chonburi Province. Water buffaloes and their jockeys are decorated with colorful cloths and flower garlands, and other events include a healthy buffalo competition, a buffalo fancy-dress contest and the Miss Farmer pageant. (Longboat races are also held during the post-Lenten period, mostly along the Eastern Seaboard.)

Elephant Roundup (third weekend of November): Held in Surin (140 miles NE of Bangkok), the Elephant Roundup is an event that gives the Suay tribesman a chance to show off their elephant-handling skills, along with parades and cultural performances.

### **Festival Tours**

Perillo Tours' *Learning Journeys* ([learningjourneys.com](http://learningjourneys.com)) has introduced a spiritual trip through India to experience the 34th annual Kalachakra Festival. Highlights of the 9-day *Dalai Lama and Spiritual India Tour* include three days at the Kalachakra Festival presided over by the Dalai Lama; community service work in the kitchen of Bangla Sahib Gurudwara in New Delhi, which feeds close to 10,000 community members daily; an evening spent learning to prepare traditional delicacies at the home of a local family; the Ganga Aarti ceremony with dazzling floating lamps in Varanasi; and a boat ride down the Ganges River at sunrise.

During the festival, guests stay in a luxury tented camp in Bodhgaya and will be able to attend Kalachakra sessions and witness the Dalai Lama delivering his teachings. The cost of \$2,175 dbf covers travel from Jan. 12-20 and includes first-class [accommodations](#), daily breakfast and select meals, guide services, and local ground and inter-India flight transportation.

Asia Transpacific Journeys' 16-day *Thailand & Laos: Essential Southeast Asia* ([asiatranspacific.com](http://asiatranspacific.com)) trip takes small groups—six to 18 participants—beyond the ordinary. They'll explore ancient and modern cities, starting in Bangkok; visit remote hilltribe villages and local crafts artists; search for wild elephants and barking deer in Khao Yai National Park; join a traditional Loy Krathong Festival in Chiang Mai and learn about Buddhist tradition directly from the monks; take a day trip into Myanmar; cruise among the Mekong Delta's sleepy villages and colorful markets; soak up the colonial charm of Luang Prabang; and enjoy a private Laos [welcome](#) ceremony and dance performance.

Departures are scheduled for Nov. 7, 2016 and Nov. 5, 2017. Priced from \$9,995 pp sharing, the tour includes a distinctive itinerary with special touches, superior hotels, most meals, and a tour leader expert in Southeast Asian history and culture.

Super Value Tours ([supervaluetours.com](http://supervaluetours.com)) is offering a 10-day *Hokkaido Snow Festival* (rates from \$3,499) departing February 2016. Book this snow-laced itinerary and your clients will take in the Sapporo Snow Festival; the Sounkyo Ice Waterfall Festival; the snow and ice sculptures lining the Odori Park; and the Fantasia Laser Lightshow in Shiretoko. Your clients can have immersive experiences as well, including hiking in snowshoes and soaking in an open-air hot spring bath on the frozen lake of Shikaribetsu. There's also the opportunity to observe penguins, polar bears, and other animals up-close at the Asahiyama Zoo; view drift ice floating on the Okhotsk Sea from an icebreaker cruise and the Ryu-hyo Norokko train; and re-enact "Frozen" scenes in a 5°F room at the Okhotsk Ryu-hyo Museum. [Accommodations](#)? Pretty cool—a luxury onsen hotel.