

Asia

Wrangel Island: Across the Top of the World (adventure cruise in the Russian Far East) 15 days from \$11,000, Heritage Expeditions, heritage-expeditions.com, 866-285-7884

I can't think of another trip on this list, except perhaps for the one to Antarctica, that feels more adventurous or evocative of the legendary explorations of the 19th Century than this one; two weeks in a Russian research vessel sailing around a remote cape off northeastern Siberia, one of the most forbidding regions in the world, to an island that is essentially a maternity ward for polar bears.

This is about as far from a luxury cruise as you can get and still be at least moderately comfortable.

The ship stops at remote outposts and sites along the way – Whalebone Alley with whale skulls, pelvises and jawbones arrayed in ways that suggest some still undetermined archeological significance; the town of Laurentiya, which at first glance looks like a gloomy Soviet relic but where indigenous dancers and musicians perform with smiles as wide as their vast land; and a summer fishing and seal hunting camp of a local Chuchi (the indigenous people of the region) family.

Principal attraction, of course, is the wildlife. Whales, walrus and especially polar bears – dozens of polar bears, some spotted from our Zodiac a safe distance off shore, others staring at you up close on the ice floes as the ship slides by, and one almost too close for comfort about 50 feet up the beach on a brief shore excursion.

For more information see *“Whales, Walrus and Polar Bears in the Russian Far East”* (both a long and short version) and my blog posts under *“Russia.”*



WRANGEL ISLAND:
Across the Top of the World

Cross the Arctic Circle and discover Russia's Wrangel Island, the world's Polar Bear denning capital on an authentic expedition cruise aboard legendary icebreaker Kapitan Khlebnikov.

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Photo: A. Ross/Heritage Expeditions

History and Culture in Exotic South East Asia (mix of group and customized tours)

This “trip” is different than all of the others listed here. It wasn't one specific trip I took but an amalgam of several in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Indonesia starting in the mid-1990s and continuing up to the present time. I don't think any region I have visited has impacted me more, by transforming my views of other cultures, the world and my place within it.

Among the places I have visited in SE Asia are northern and northeastern Thailand, home to the country's history and far from the discos, beaches and resorts of the south; Luang Prabang, the former capital of Laos, one of the most beautiful and graceful cities in the world; the atmospheric ruins of the Angkor empire in Cambodia including Angkor Wat; Hanoi, a walkable colonial city with a seering history; and sailing through the



Photo: Don Mankin

Lesser Sunda islands in Indonesia, including Komodo island, the home of one of the weirdest and most sinister creatures on earth. There is much, much more that I can't fit into this brief description.

It's also worth mentioning that the dollar goes far in SE Asia. This is one of the few regions of the world where I can afford to stay in luxury hotels and book customized trips that include my own guide/translator and a driver on an itinerary of my own design.

For more information see my articles, *“Three Enchanting Weeks in Sultry*

Sumatra,” “A Life Transformed in South East Asia,” “Bangkok: The Side Tourist Rarely See,” “Through a Wormhole on a Small Boat Cruise in Indonesia,” “A Mekong Meditation,” and “Cambodia Off the Beaten Track.” Also see the chapter, *“Scenery, Serenity, History, and Culture in Laos”* in *Riding the Hulahula to the Arctic Ocean* (National Geographic, 2008) and my blog posts under *“Indonesia 2014,” “Sumatra,”* and *“Bangkok 2014”* and *“2016.”*

I will be leading a trip to SE Asia later this year. If you are interested, check out the ad in this magazine.

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