



Fairy-tale décor and a stunning beachside setting make Bali's Ku De Ta the perfect place to watch the sun set over a long, cool drink.

From Mao-Tai to Mai Tai

Ed Peters raises a glass to Asia's dynamic bar scene.

Asia is a cocktail of races and cultures, and it has certainly made its mark on the world's drinks menus. The Singapore Sling is a staple of all self-respecting bartenders' repertoires. German colonists launched the Tsingtao brewery in the early 20th century. And in Mike Todd's classic 1956 film *Around the World in 80 Days*, Inspector Fix lived up to his name when he slipped Phileas Fogg's faithful valet Passepartout a "Hong Kong Snickersnee".

The Screwdriver is a better-known cocktail, but fledgling barman Johnny Chung Kam Hung had never heard of it when Clark Gable—who was shooting *Soldier of Fortune* in Hong Kong in 1954—ordered one in the bar of **The Peninsula hotel**. Undaunted, the King of Hollywood showed him the correct way to mix vodka and orange juice and it remains one of Chung's specialties. More than half a century on, the 66-year-old Hong Konger is now senior bartender, and continues to dispense Screwdrivers and the accompanying anecdote with alacrity.

When it comes to enjoying grain and grape in all their multifarious liquid forms, in swish hotel bars and ritzy drinking dives, it seems that in only a few decades Asia has vaulted from mao-tai—the basic but memorably potent

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Chinese liquor distilled from fermented sorghum—to Mai Tai—the syrupy concoction of rum and curaçao, garnished with a sprig of fresh mint.

It's not simply cocktails. Wine—initially mixed by novice tippers with Coke or lemonade according to whether it was red or white, no matter what its vintage—is now seen as a chic accompaniment to lunch and dinner, as well as something to be enjoyed and appreciated for its own sake.

“My classes book up within minutes of being posted on the internet,” says Annabel Jackson, who lectures in wine at the Institute of European Studies in Macau and the University of Hong Kong. “While the students have to pass an exam, they are also treating learning about wine as a life skill, and more and more of them are drinking socially nowadays. It's something you see all over Asia. I worked in Hanoi for a while and almost all my friends and former staff there drink red wine, especially the women. One night in Shanghai recently, I was amazed to see that practically half the young people in the bar were quaffing champagne. However, there's still a shortage of wine education—and there's a real thirst for knowledge.”

Shanghai ranks as one of Asia's hottest cities, with a wealth of bars whose patrons may not necessarily attend wine school but who are more than enthusiastic about bolstering their education. Quite the most prominent locale is the **Cloud 9** bar at the **Grand Hyatt hotel**, which hovers on the uppermost floor of the 1,380-foot-high Jin Mao Tower, making it the highest bar in the world. Complementing the 360-degree view of the city, strolling magicians, fortune-tellers and portrait artists offer their services to customers, who may also discover ample entertainment on Cloud 9's eclectic cocktail menu.

“**Blue Shanghai** is one of the most popular—a mix of white wine, gin and lime juice with just a touch of liqueur to add the colour,” explains Wendy Xu, the Grand Hyatt's marketing communications manager. “Some guests prefer a sweeter taste, so we also serve **Snow**, which combines vanilla vodka, rum and Baileys Irish Cream. And there's also a range of Asian tapas on the menu, which pair nicely with Australian Shiraz.”

Elsewhere in Shanghai, the views might not be quite so awesome, but the clientele certainly compensates. The city's beautiful people make a beeline for **Bar Rouge**, intent on seeing and being seen beneath the two dozen red Venetian chandeliers suspended above the oval bar and on the extensive wooden terrace outside. International DJs add to the mix, not to mention the decibels, as the jeunesse dorée hit the floor.

For a quieter evening, the ideal spot is **Sasha's**, a converted mansion in the former French concession whose garden imparts the ambience of a highly sociable drinks party hosted



Wine and spirits fair Vinexpo Asia-Pacific was held in Hong Kong this year, attracting more than 8,000 visitors and nearly 700 exhibitors from 32 countries, who had around 70,000 bottles on offer for tasting.

Cloud 9 bar at the Grand Hyatt hotel hovers on the uppermost floor of the 1,380-foot-high Jin Mao Tower, making it the highest bar in the world.



Clockwise from far left: The Screwdriver is still a speciality cocktail at **The Peninsula** hotel bar, Hong Kong; **Cloud 9** at the Grand Hyatt offers a spectacular setting with breathtaking views over Shanghai; the city's style setters are drawn to the eye-catching décor and international DJ sets at Shanghai hot spot **Bar Rouge**.

by friends of friends. While wine and spirits are popular here and all over Shanghai, beer—once thought of, like Pimm's, as a summer drink—is now very much in vogue, though lagers such as Tsingtao continue to be the thirst-quencher of choice.

Shanghai's rival in the party stakes is **Hong Kong**, where a nightly unrehearsed Mardi Gras ebbs and flows round the city centre's entertainment zone of **Lan Kwai Fong**.

Jonathan Zeman, whose father Allan was largely responsible for launching the after-hours revolution in the area in the early 1980s, has observed the scene's expansion with an interest not solely confined to the bottom line.

“Watching tastes develop has been a lesson in economics, human psychology and sociology!” he says. “Around 15 years ago, beer meant San Miguel or Carlsberg, spirits meant Johnnie Walker, and a good bottle of wine was a bottle that the restaurant told you was good. But slowly different drinks started to appear as suppliers' monopolies were broken.



Groovers & Shakers

Unmissable cocktails from Asia's top mixologists.

Ku De Ta, Bali. While DJs such as Pete Tong and Mark Farina spin, Steve Collinson mixes—and how! Try his *Grilled Pineapple and Black Pepper Martini*, with caramelised grilled pineapple, muddled and shaken with cracked black pepper, vodka and chamomile syrup, and finished with freshly squeezed lemon juice—served straight up. Sensational. www.kudeta.net

Linga, Siem Reap (above). From Havana to Siem Reap: Linga's bar team—Krisna and Bean—proudly tout the *Traditional Fidel Mojito* as their top concoction. "We use Havana Club rum to give it that smoky, authentic taste, muddle mint with stems intact to add an extra hint of flavour, and serve it in a highball glass and topped with soda water."

www.lingabar.com

Fringe, Hong Kong. It's called the *Fringe Sparkle*, the product of long hours of deliberation in the charismatic confines of Central's foremost arts venue, the Fringe Club. Bar Captain Ray Li describes the final product—peach schnapps, cranberry juice and sparkling wine with fresh lime and mint—as the perfect blend of fun and sophistication.

www.hkfringeclub.com

The Governor's Residence, Yangon. Tha Toe Aung is generally known as Freddy around the Governor's Residence, but the Heineken-trained barman's prime cocktail only has one name, and that's *Governor's Sunrise*. Melding Bacardi Light, triple sec, fresh orange juice and the merest dash of lemon juice and grenadine syrup, it's a truly classic sundowner. www.governorsresidence.com

Q Bar, Bangkok. "We've got a huge selection of Iced Teas," says Q Bar's Shinatib Lim, "and one of the most popular includes vodka, tequila, gin, light rum, triple sec, crème de cassis, Midori, and Malibu rum." So what's it called? "*Radio Active Iced Tea*," says Ms Lim with a grin. www.qbarbangkok.com

White Box, Phuket. As the song goes, diamonds are a girl's best friend, and according to Khun Pet (whose name means diamond), her second best should be his *Lychee Martini*—vodka and curaçao with lychee, lemon and sugar syrup. Of course, the guys like it too! www.whiteboxrestaurant.com



From top: An impressive selection of spirits on display at Bangkok's **Q Bar**; restaurants and bars abound in Hong Kong's bustling entertainment district Lan Kwai Fong; the **Fringe Club** in Hong Kong boasts an intimate ground-floor bar and a rooftop garden.

Nowadays, drinkers—whether local or expat—are very well educated. Once, wine drinkers would only buy brand names such as Château Lafite, whereas now they choose a bottle for its characteristics and for their own personality. As an indication, there's one shop here that specialises in Hungarian wines.

"The abolition of import duty on wines in March should make for an even more educated wine-drinking public. Obviously once-expensive bottles are now cheaper, and cheaper bottles are now economical enough to allow people to experiment more often with lesser-known products."

Seven nights a week, from dusk till dawn and beyond, Zeman is being proved right. The original Lan Kwai Fong strip has blossomed, extending up and out towards the residential district of Mid-levels to form a practically unbroken corridor of bars, eateries and clubs nestled beneath the skyscrapers.

"Spoilt for choice" barely begins to encapsulate the drinking options—designer dives, mock pubs, lounges providing manicures for one hand and Martinis for the other, and there's even a cocktail bar in the middle of the city's oldest upmarket department store, Lane Crawford.

Slightly more out of the way, **Gecko** lurks off Hollywood Road. It is as popular for its lack of pretension as for its live jazz, to say nothing of the absinthe on offer. Equally down to earth, the **Fringe Club**—part of an alternative arts centre—is open to all comers, with a cosy ground-floor bar and a highly hospitable roof garden, all housed in a former dairy.

If Hong Kong's drinking spots could be said to have a fault, it's that they're usually on the small side—understandable given the city's paucity of space. No such problems constrain **Bangkok**, where a talented bunch of interior designers have been able to give their imagination free rein. **Witness Syn** has more than a touch of the Austin Powers about it, with a carpet that actually twinkles and bubble seats suspended from the ceiling.

The décor is a little more stark at **Hu'u**, very much a hang-out for the rich and determinedly famous, who browse the international tapas and lengthy cocktail lists with urbanity, while **Q Bar** claims to host the largest collection of spirits and cocktails in the capital. Not that everywhere is built to such imposing scale. **Face** is a bijou bar contained in a traditional teak house, though the drinks are on the gratifyingly large side.



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Clockwise from above: Stylish seating and marina views at Privé's **Gastrobar** in Singapore; a Singapore Sling at **Raffles Hotel**, the cocktail's legendary birthplace; relaxed, indulgent elegance in the **Kipling Bar** at The Governor's Residence, Yangon.



China is the only Asian country listed among the world's top 20 wine-consuming nations, reportedly getting through 74m cases in 2007 (up 35 per cent from 2006).

Further south in Thailand, **Phuket** continues to reinvent itself. **The Roof Top Lounge**, above the uber-cool White Box restaurant at Kalim Bay, takes in the sort of view that makes many patrons do a triple take, then order a double so they can drink in the panorama while whetting their whistle.

If Thailand's islands are laid back, places such as **Siem Reap** in Cambodia are practically horizontal. After a day browsing the wonders of Angkor Wat, the world's largest temple complex, visitors make tracks for the **Linga Bar**, which is very much the town's social Mecca.

"I think it has been so successful because it is a rare combination of great location, international-standard drinks, affordable prices and a warm and friendly atmosphere," says the bar's general manager Martin Dishman. "We are among the top bars in the region thanks to our level of quality and our unique style, while our fresh local ingredients—lime, lemon grass, mint and the like—add a special flavour. But at the end of the day, I think we succeed because we know what we are doing when it comes to making cocktails."

Similarly exotically Asian is **Yangon** (Rangoon), Myanmar's main port. It exudes a relaxed charm that is best espoused by **The Governor's Residence**, where the Kipling Bar is a repository of ease and indulgence. Patrons can drink in the atmosphere of days gone by, as well as cooling draughts of local beer. It's a parallel story at **La Résidence Phou Vao's Champa Bar**, in **Luang Prabang** in northern Laos. It provides the perfect setting to watch the sun slip beneath the horizon while the cocktails slip down almost unaided in one of the most deliciously peaceful spots in Asia.

Perhaps the biggest change to the Asian drinking scene has happened in **Bali**, once the final resting place of hippies on the Kabul-Kathmandu-Kuta trail, but now a style destination in its own right. The flower children who survived may now all be qualified chartered accountants, but something of their spirit lives on at **Ku De Ta**, a beachside restaurant and bar that is hip rather than hippy. It gains much from its spacious central pool, to say nothing of the natural son et lumière staged every day at dusk.

It's not only the Emerald Isle that has smartened up its act of late. **Singapore's** bars have undergone a renaissance in recent years, taking advantage of the climate and marine vistas as well as a healthy penchant for whistle wetting. There are few choicer spots to take it easy than the welcoming sofas of the **Gastrobar** in **Privé** at the Keppel Bay Marina, a magnet for the Lion City's smart set and anyone who enjoys a drink in thoughtfully designed surroundings.

Of course, it was Singapore that supplied the genesis of the modern Asian drinking scene in the early 20th century,

when Ngiam Tong Boon, a Hainanese bartender at **Raffles Hotel**, slung together gin, cherry brandy, pineapple and lime juice, Cointreau, Dom Benedictine, grenadine and a dash of Angostura bitters, topped it with a cherry, and—hey presto—the **Singapore Sling** was born. Bright pink in colour, it was originally intended to be a women's drink, but it has spread around the globe to become an Asian drinking icon with universal appeal. ☺

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