

Travel, Adventure, and a Comfortable Income with Photo Tours in Asia

By Kirsten Raccuia

From an early age Matt Brandon loved both travel and photography. As an adult, he discovered a clever way to leverage his hobbies into an income that affords him a great lifestyle full of adventure.

In 1993, Matt was operating tours in Kashmir, India, for a U.S. tourism company. At that point, he was only taking pictures as a hobby and had all but given up the idea of actually working in photography.

While Matt was giving the tours, he would always have his trusty camera and soon realized there was market for photography tours. He started creating workshops for people who wanted to explore India and take fantastic photos of their adventures.

“When you’re living in another country, exploring is part of your daily life,” says Matt. “So when it came to the tours and workshops, I knew where to take people, especially from a photographer’s standpoint.”

Soon, he formed his own photo-tours company, *The Digital Trekker*. Matt’s tours are part guided tour through a magical land, and part photography lesson. Matt coordinates everything from the minute they arrive until the moment their flight home takes off.

While living in Kashmir, Matt met a man who happened to run a stock photography agency. “I obviously had hundreds of photos of India from my tours,” says Matt. “He liked what he saw and started selling my images right away. I couldn’t believe it was that simple.”

Once he started making the extra money from stock photography, Matt realized he could live anywhere in the world and plan his tours from there. When it came time for his daughter to go to school, he and his wife, Alou, decided to leave India and began researching nearby countries. With first-rate hospitals, international schools, and palm-fringed beaches, Penang, Malaysia, started to look like the perfect fit. Best of all, most of the people living on the island speak English, making for an easy transition.

“I love it here in Penang,” says Matt. “There’s a nice slow pace, and I feel

accepted here. Despite living in India for many years, I always felt like an outsider. I never really felt like I was at home. Penang is a multicultural society, and all the people from the various cultures accept each other. It’s home.”

There are three major cultures at play in Penang: Indian, Chinese, and Malay. In one week Matt can be at an Indian festival where they walk over hot coals to pay homage to a Hindu god... and the next day be part of the Chinese New Year celebrations. With so many festivals on one island, Penang is a photographer’s dream.

“I can spend my days walking along the beach, taking part in a religious festivity, or just wandering the old center of colonial Georgetown—with or without my camera,” says Matt. “Penang offers a livable, vibrant world that is slow enough to enjoy yet exciting enough to keep it interesting. And it’s a lot cheaper to live here; you don’t have to work as hard or as much as you would to make ends meet in the U.S.”

Matt and his family rent a five-bedroom house in Penang’s historic George Town, right near the beach, for under \$1,000 a month. Their home is within walking distance of one of Penang’s famous hawker centers. Here, they can eat all the dishes that put Penang on the foodie map: Indian curries, ginger and soy steamed fish, silky Chinese noodle dishes—all for only a few dollars each.

“I love the ease and quality of life here, especially the low cost of living,” says Mike. “Plus, it’s so easy and cost effective to run my tours from here.”

Even though Matt makes good money from his stock photography, the tours are still his biggest money makers. He runs them from anywhere and to anywhere. He’s done a few in Malaysia, Thailand, and Tibet—but mostly goes to India. One of the bonuses of leading the tours is that the more pictures he takes, the more he can sell to his stock agency.



On the multicultural island of Penang, photographer Matt Brandon says he is spoiled for breath-taking photo opportunities, like this one.

Matt does at least two tours a year to India that go to various locations and have different skill levels. When he takes his tour groups to the mysterious and chaotic capital, Delhi, they explore the markets and back alleys of the ancient city, as well as various mosques. They’ve gone off the beaten path to visit a holy shrine of Nizamuddin and to the most visited site in India, the Taj Mahal. Boating along the mighty Ganges River, they passed along the *ghats* (bathing sites) and watched the daily rituals of Hindus take place.

Matt wants you to come away from the tour as a photographic storyteller and creates each tour with that in mind. He provides groups with a local English-speaking fixer that will ask the locals if it’s okay to take photographs, so as not to offend.

Overall, living in Penang has provided a great many opportunities for work and play,” says Matt.

“One of the most incredible advantages of living in this part of the world is that we are surrounded by diverse and amazing places to visit,” says Matt. “Anytime we feel like it and have a little cash—or need to add to my portfolio—we hop on a cheap flight to Vietnam, Bali, or the Philippines. We just came back from a trip to see the komodo dragons on Komodo Island, Indonesia.”

“It’s a nice life. It’s just amazing. We’ve seen so much of the world from here. I can fly to Tibet and pay no more than if I flew from Texas to Hawaii.”