

DRAGON INN
REGATTA LEPA FLOATING HOTEL SEMPOENA

The
Corn Flake
Traveller in



Indones



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Travel





Indonesia is a huge country made up of lots of islands of different sizes, most of them formed by volcanos but all inhabited by some of the friendliest people I have met on my adventures so far. It boasts a host of cultural delights and some really unique attractions, such as the Komodo Dragons or the Tona Toraja area.

I visited Indonesia during my 6 month tour of Southeast Asia and was excited to cross the border from Malaysia after hearing so many good stories from fellow travellers. Unfortunately Ramadan postponed my arrival for about a week with all public transport fully booked I was forced to wait for ages at the side of the road for a vehicle to pass with some spare seats. I also had to wait 3 days staying in

a floating hotel in Semporna, sharing a room with a travel companion suspended above the water waiting for the embassy to open.

Eventually we got our visas and took a ferry to Nunukan, an island on the Indonesian side of the border just off the East coast of Borneo and here the universe presented us with an incredible stroke of luck. The ferry we wanted only came to the island every 2 weeks but happened to be leaving just 5 hours after we arrived. Scared to miss it I took a taxi to the town and withdrew 3.6 million Rupiah from the bank before heading back to the port as a multi-millionaire for the first time in my life. We paid a mere €20 for the 36 hour journey to Sulawesi, which included BBQ'd fish with rice, soup and cups of tea.

We boarded the boat to find it more than full, people in economy class were packed in like sardines, with people lying all over the floor. It was quite intimidating but people helped us find somewhere to lie down, squeezing us in next to a friendly family. There was a lot of commotion with little men loading huge cargo boxes on to the boat and people moving on and off the ferry right up until it departed 2 hours late, which I was informed was on-time in Indonesia.

The people were fascinated by our presence and didn't stop looking at us like they couldn't believe we were there. They watched us do everything but in particular liked the strange things we did, like when I blew up my camping mattress and a crowd





of people formed around us staring, pointing and laughing, some even took photos.

It was really hot in the lower decks of economy class, the heat of the engines and the 'penguin effect' from so many people adding to the heat of the air as we approached the equator. It was difficult to sleep at night; mainly due to non-stop sweating making it really uncomfortable but also the clucking chickens, the screaming children and the 'call to prayer' bellowed over the tannoy.

During the day I was like a zombie but it didn't matter as there was nothing to do except wander the boat and take siestas. We met lots of people as everyone wanted to meet us and we were treated like movie stars, with people taking pictures, wanting

autographs and watching us, no matter what we were doing. It felt like a really happy place with a great community spirit, lots of laughter and people playing guitars.

We were supposed to arrive at 10am but it was closer to 5pm, getting off the boat was great fun like a cross between standing on a football terrace and a stampede as we had to fight our way past people unloading boxes of cargo.

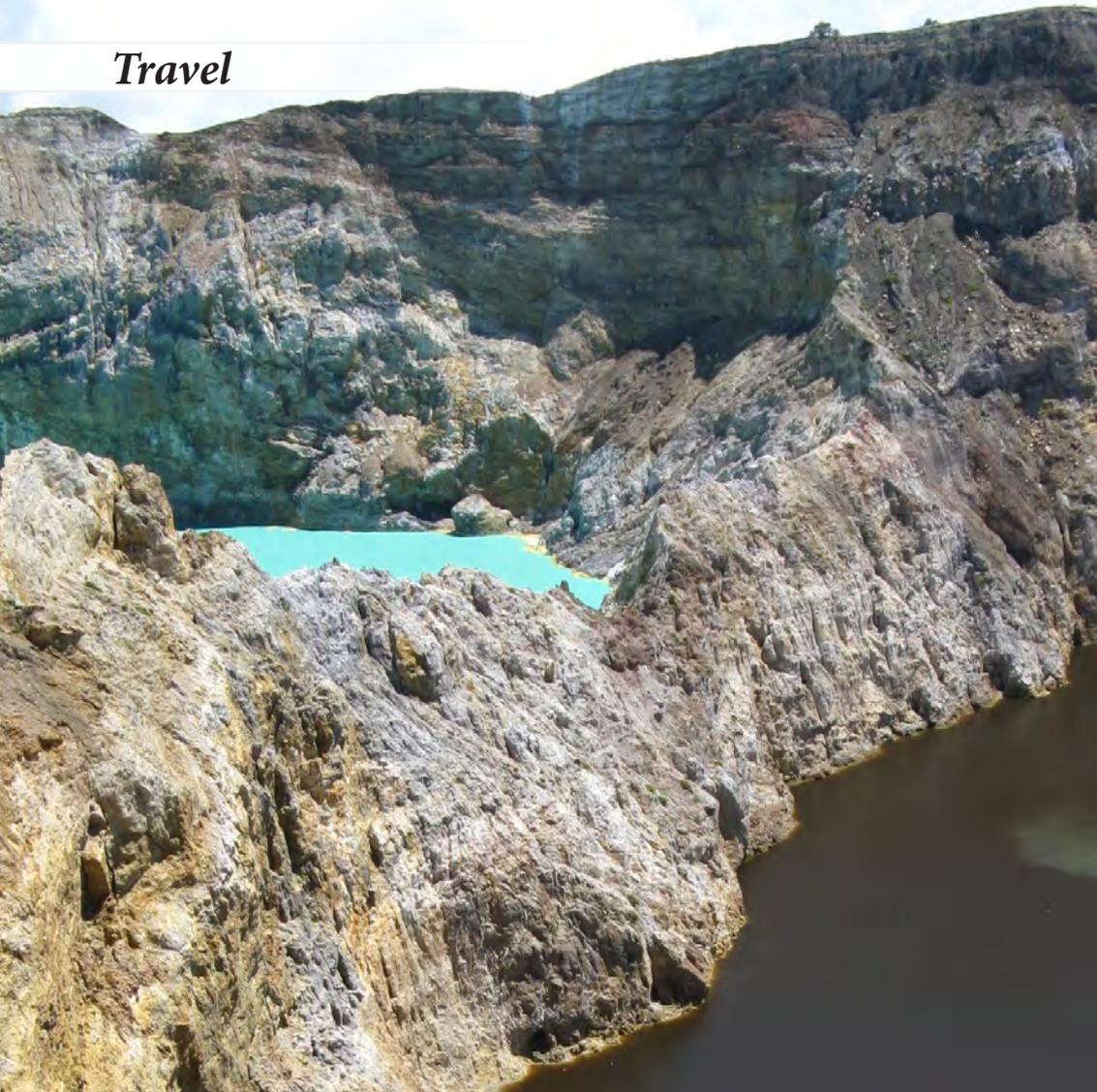
We treated ourselves to a €6 room with A.C and a warm shower then walked around the town. The people on the main land were equally friendly, we talked to many, or more honestly listened to them ask the same 4 or 5 questions over and over again. There were plenty of 'Hello Mr what is your name?' and 'Where are you from?' questions flying about,

the real basics that they must have all learnt at school. Sadly we were in no mood to socialise just wanting a shower and some decent sleep.

The next day we experienced more of the travelling difficulties in this part of the world, leaving at 8:30am we arrived in the Tana Toraja area just before 7pm having travelled about 120km as the bird flies. It was quite frustrating but the scenery was great and not having seen any tourists for weeks we really enjoyed the feeling of being in a completely different world.

The next day we took a brilliant tour of the area which had brought us to Sulawesi in the first place. The guide drove us around in a 4x4 to a number of different towns in remote locations, such as Lemo, Ke'te kesu





and Londa and he spoke pretty good English so he taught us about the Toraja people.

They are an ethnic group of people with a unique culture who put a huge emphasis on death and passing into the afterlife. They carve impressive tombs into rock cliffs which take three men 5 – 7 months to make using a hammer and chisel. They also place dolls outside the tombs which resemble the deceased, then they place the dead bodies inside during a ritual that can involve sacrificing up to 100 buffalo (the number killed depends on the wealth of the family). Sometimes they have to wait years to be able to afford the buffalo or to have the tomb made and as they don't consider them dead until after the burial they keep the corpse in their houses and even continue to put out plates of food for the body. Their buildings have distinct roofs that look like massive buffalo horns or boats without masts and every house faces north to south, a tribal tradition stemming from their ancestral Chinese settlers.

We visited a sacred site in the forest where they bury dead babies by placing them in miniature tombs carved into huge trees before covering the hole with a piece of wood. Some

of them were 20 years old and the trees had healed and re-grown encasing the bodies.

The villages were surrounded by rice fields and set in valleys and in one village we went inside one of the houses with 3 uncomfortably hot rooms. We also saw some caves with coffins inside, other coffins hanging from the rocks with loads of human bones spilling out of them and more tombs with the caricature-style wooden carvings, which I found a little spooky as they look like the dead person in the tomb.

After Sulawesi we flew to Bali to begin visiting some of the smaller islands. Bali is heavily effected by Australian tourists with resorts full of "nice" hotels, restaurants and bars on the beach. We couldn't resist the temptation to have a few luxuries before taking the ferry to the island of Sumba, which was a complete contrast with only a couple of basic hotels.

We explored Sumba on motorbikes, it was a very dry island which felt strange after being in such jungle infested environments for the last 3 ½ months but the countryside was really pretty. It was also very baron with only an occasional village or farm and lots of communities centred around rice farming.

The people are still quite indigenous with traditional lifestyles and unique houses with witch's hat shaped roofs. They produce ikat, a fabric they weave with simple colours and patterns, and carve massive tombs from huge slabs using the favourite tool of this country, the hammer and chisel.

We came to one town with no hotels but luckily met a guy called 'Sony' that spoke English and let us stay in a room in his house. We stayed another night in a beautiful location with a great view along the beach with layered mountains, more traditional witch's hat houses and some even bigger tombs.

After a few days we gave the bikes back then waited in the port for the ferry crossing to the island of Flores and reflected on the beautiful scenery and the very interested and interesting people. Oh, and on the way back to the port I had to kick a chicken while doing about 40 mph to stop it running under the bike, it was a great volley.

We spent a day travelling across the long thin island of Flores; 2 buses, 8 hours and a total distance of about 150km. Up and down, twisting and turning, up and down one volcano after another and

the 2nd journey had a pig on the roof which squealed for the entire 2 hours.

We arrived in Moni on the slopes of Mount Kelimutu and checked into a hotel run by an Indonesian Rasta, who helped us make arrangements to climb to the top of the volcano on a moto-taxi. The view from the top was amazing, the sight of the surrounding valleys enriched by the 3 lakes sat in their own little craters. We spent a while admiring the views and looking at the turquoise, coffee brown and black coloured lakes then we started walking back down to town. After about 2km we got picked up by some Indonesian tourists touring in a vehicle full of stuffed toys.

I met some friends from England on a beautiful island just off the coast of Flores with one restaurant and about 10 huts on the beach. We had to pre-order our dinner so they had time to kill it especially for us, the chicken was served to two people only, half each. It was an expensive resort so that night I fell asleep under the stars in my hammock, although I was pretty drunk so I didn't swing much.

My friends had chartered a boat to sail around the turquoise waters and take us to see some Komodo Dragons. We slept a night on the boat drinking beers under an incredibly clear night sky, great for star gazing and I saw 18 shooting stars in about 4 hours.

The Komodo Dragons only exist on two islands, Rinca and Komodo (populations 1100 and 1300 respectively) we visited Rinca, the smaller island to give a better chance of seeing the dragons, which worked as we ended up seeing around 30 of them.

We got excited when we thought we saw a dragon at a distance while walking from the dock to the entrance, but we soon got to see 2 huge lizards up close and personal as some were hanging around the entrance to the park. They are huge with big meaty muscles (the males are bigger, up to 3 metres long) and can live between 40 and 50 years. We paid a €15 entrance fee and decided on a two hour guided walk of the area, then we proceeded to walk in the baking heat (it was 35°C at 9am) through the lovely scenery; a dry

and dusty terrain sprinkled with palm trees.

We saw some females at the entrances to their nests, which they dig under the ground to lay eggs in, once they hatch the babies make for the trees to avoid predators, including their own kind as they are cannibals; although they generally eat goats, monkeys or buffalo. We arrived at a dried up spring, reduced to a mud bath during the summer and there were 8 of them in close proximity with some buffalo hanging around too. We saw a kind of chase, I say kind of because the dragons move really slowly, he could have got a buffalo leg if he had been just a little bit quicker as he was only 30cm away but was too nonchalant. They are very patient hunters, generally they bite their victims and infect them with 80 types of bacteria present in their saliva. The bite



causes them to die weeks later and the lizards wait patiently to eat them, interestingly they hunt alone but tend to share their food (the guide was very informative and I learnt a lot).

We were dropped back on Flores and checked into a 5-star hotel on the beach, the first time I have stayed in such class, which thankfully cost me nothing as my friend had a spare bed and allowed me to join him and work my way through his toiletries. I noticed the hotel is a bit of an illusion, appearing to be posh (but in reality it is hard in a country this poor), I broke the bed, Justin the shower and Robin the toilet and we were only there about 15 hours.

I crossed the islands of Sumbawa and Lombok in 24 hours and arrived on the Gili Islands to chill for a week and to eat my Indonesian Corn Flakes, then I said goodbye to the boys and carried on to Bali. My impression of Bali changed when I

spent time away from the tourist hotspots in the poor, rice growing communities, where people were more interested in meeting me than me opening my wallet.

I hired a motorbike for the day costing a brilliant €4 then drove around admiring the scenic, hilly area covered in rice fields and temples. I went to Gunung Kawi, a really nice 11th century site set in a little valley with some lovely stone shrines cut into the side of two cliffs. There were also a couple of temples, that strangely you couldn't enter if you were female and it was your 'special time' of the month. I still haven't worked out why.

In the evening I watched one of the famous traditional Balinese dances, there were no instruments just 100 men chanting and harmonising, a bit like in Indiana Jones - 'Temple of Doom'. There were great costumes and the finale was cool as a guy dressed as a horse or Naga (it was hard to tell) kicked and walked over a big fire 5 or 6 times until it was just a pile of embers; all barefoot.

I arranged two dives for €30, the first dive I saw a tiny pygmy seahorse about the size of a penny coin as well as an octopus and the second dive I saw the sunken U.S.S Liberty, a WW2 shipwreck which ran aground and was pushed further into the sea when Volcano Agung erupted. An amazing dive and amazing to see how the coral grows

so quickly completely covering the ships surface. The coral makes it look nice compared to the usual dull grey, with some cool shapes too like wheels, grids and doorways and some sections you can swim through and under.

I spent a couple of days travelling from Bali into the heart of Java with a day at Gunung Bromo, a huge volcano with a 10km wide crater and smaller volcanoes forming inside it. I spent 4 days travelling to Jakarta, stopping in Yogyakarta to see its Batik Artwork and the Dieng Plateau, an area which has a lot of geothermal activity. Then I flew from Jakarta to Vietnam for the last stage of my Asian tour.

For more stories or more details of these stories, I recently self-published an e-book "The Adventures of a Hard-up, Diabetic Traveller with a Corn Flake Problem"