

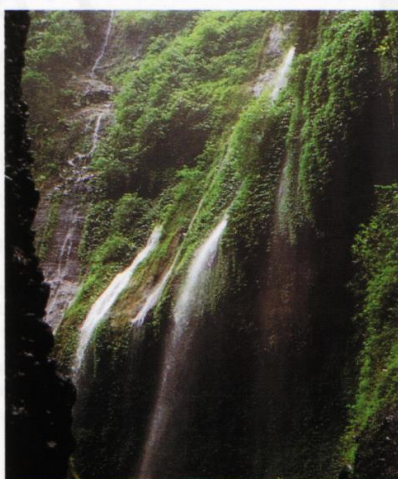


Living in the shadow of the Titans

When it comes to volcanoes, no country can surpass Indonesia. The best place for volcano-spotting, as **Jan Pasternak** found to his delight, is East Java

It was hot and very uncomfortable in the crammed minibus as it climbed the narrow, winding road up the mountain. The minibus, on its regular run from Probolinggo to Ngadisari, was packed like a can of sardines and I was on my way to Tengger Mountains to see the famous volcanic landscape of the Mount Bromo region in East Java.

When it comes to volcanoes, Indonesia tops the list with more than 300 of them, some 130 of which are classified as active. On the densely-populated island of Java—home to many of Indonesia's most potent volcanoes—millions of people live in the shadow of these awesome "Titans" and the ever-present menace of their unpredictable mood. But, while the volcanoes may be capable of destroy-



ing life, they also support it by fertilising and enriching the soil.

On arrival in Ngadisari, the deep breath of fresh, cool mountain air that

An active Mount Bromo crater, on the left, and the towering Mount Semeru; Madakaripura Waterfall (below left) in the Tengger Mountains

flooded into my lungs was a big relief. The village is perched high on the mountainside at about 2000 metres. The grandeur of its location and its cleanliness are very pleasing indeed after the heat, dreariness and pollution of the coastal towns. From Ngadisari to the scenic area of Mount Bromo is approximately another four kilometres and I was given two options: hire a pony or walk.

Needing some exercise, I chose the latter. Apart from several stretches of rather steep climbing, the hike is quite pleasant, winding mostly through fields of maize, soya bean, cabbage and other vegetables.

When finally I reached my location, I stood there in awe, overwhelmed by the breathtaking view that had opened up in front of me.

I was standing on the edge of the outer caldera, the remnant of ancient crater that must have been of immense size before its self-destruction aeons ago. The caldera is about eight kilometres wide and must be one of the world's most extensive.

The current cone, at 2392 metres, is but a scion of the previous Mount Bromo. This cone, with its active crater, grows from the caldera floor that it shares with another, higher, cone—the inactive Mount Batok right next to it. The "sea of sand", as the locals call it, is a plain of volcanic ash and lava

stretching for miles across the caldera floor. The area is of such alluring scenic beauty that it is almost impossible to resist spending a little longer there. Luckily, accommodation is plentiful and ranges from comfortable hotel rooms to spartan private lodgings.

The local inhabitants of the Mount Bromo region, the Tenggerese, are as colourful and interesting as the region itself. Mainly farmers and of the Hindu faith, they are hardy, straightforward and friendly people who are blessed with richly-fertile volcanic soil that produces an abundance of crops. They are descendants of the soldiers of the Hinduistic Majapahit empire who first found refuge in the Tengger Mountains in the 16th century after fleeing the spread of Islam through Java.

The main annual ceremony, the Kesodo rites festival, takes place in the last month of the Tenggerese year. Performed and dedicated to the god of fire that is believed to dwell in the crater, the Kesodo rites begin before sunrise when local priests bless thousands of Tenggerese pilgrims who come to the edge of the volcano carrying flaming torches and offerings.

When the first sight of the sun appears, the pilgrims cast flowers, fruit, vegetables and sometimes money, chickens and even the occasional goat into Bromo's infernal depth, praying to appease the god and for prosperity in the year ahead.

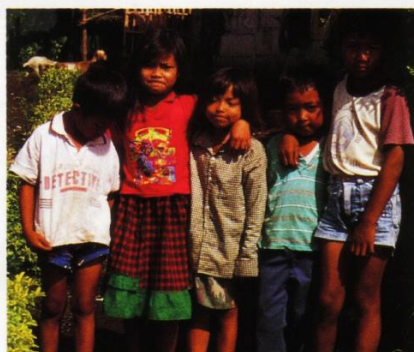
After exploring the area for several days, I moved on. Instead of returning by the same route, I decided to take a scenic mountain hike to the village of Tosari, some four hours away on foot.

On top of the range, the hike was relatively flat and easy, tracking through secondary forest, grasslands and alpine-like meadows. I took advantage of the good weather by stopping many times at vantage points to revel in the magnificent views. Especially spectacular was the sight of Mount Semeru—another active East Java volcano located about 20 kilometres south of Mount Bromo, which was puffing smoke at the time. Mount Semeru is also the highest peak in Java, at 3676 metres. It last erupted violently in February 1994.

After drinking in a few more glances of the great spectacle, I rejoined the trail, which soon turned downwards. It was then "downhill all



The village of Ngadisari; a farmer from Jurangkwalu takes his produce to a local market; children in the village of Jungko, which is perched on the lower slopes of Mount Arjuna

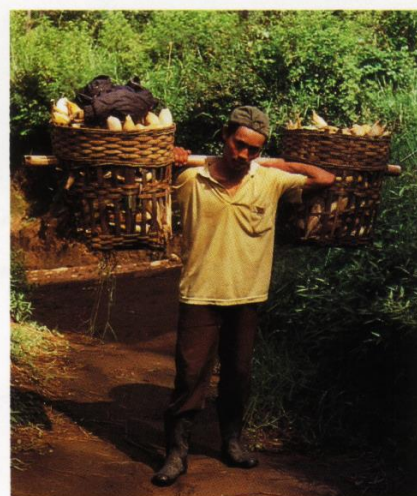


the way" through fertile, terraced fields along the track to the village of Tosari. I was glad I decided to stay overnight, as I could watch a memorable sunset over Mount Arjuna and Mount Welirang.

Next morning, I caught a bus to Pasuruan and from there to Batu in Malang regency. This is another region of spectacular East Java volcanic scenery, dominated by Mount Arjuna at 3339 metres, Mount Welirang at 3156m, Mount Kawi 2551m and Mount Butak 2868m.

Although Batu and its environs are famous for apples, the area is also a very popular destination for weekenders. Every weekend the place swells with visitors—especially from the city of Surabaya—who flock to the area to escape the heat and pollution. They buy apples by the bag and a brisk trade is also done in potted flowers and other plants.

The neat mountain resort of Seleka, about eight kilometres from



Batu, is an ideal place to spend a few days' relaxation. Above Seleka, on the lower slopes of Mount Arjuna, lies the picturesque village of Jungko. For those who get tired of apple orchards and vegetable fields, nearby Mount Kojor—or Gunung Biru (Blue Mountain), as it is called by local people—has some good bush-walking trails through the rainforest.

Higher still above Jungko is the village of Jurangkwalu. Situated high on the side of Mount Welirang, the village is known for its many hot springs and sulphur vapours.

After some vigorous hiking in the area I was more than willing to immerse my jaded body in one of the springs. After all, it is highly recommended by the locals, who say that, according to legend, whoever takes a bath there will be free of disease and will stay young for ever. □

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