



Detail of huge ceremonial candles at Sam Po Kong temple.

In the days when Yogyakarta, or Mataram as it was known, was at its peak as the centre of a Buddhist empire, the area around modern Semarang was little more than a backwater. Traders from the south would make the two or three day journey through the mountains to bargain their produce for exotic imported commodities like ceramics and jewellery. Early records are scarce, but geological surveys have shown that the sea was probably about a kilometre further inland. It was at this time, in the early 15th century, that the Chinese emperor's envoy, Admiral Zhenghe, sailed into the peaceful cove and into legend. In command of a huge fleet of some 62 ships and over 27,000 men, the admiral was on a mission from his emperor to re-establish diplomatic and trade links with South East Asia, India and Eastern

Africa. His voyages were extraordinary feats for the time and clearly the stuff of legend. So great were the legends, that Zhenghe was immortalised as a kind of demigod, with the name Sam Po Kong, meaning the "Eunuch of the three jewels". Temples are still main-

tained in his honour along the coasts of Java, Sumatra and the Malaysian peninsula, but it's believed that the 'Gedung Batu' temple here in Semarang was the first to be erected in the area that is modern-day Indonesia. It's said that Sam Po, who was a Muslim, after stepping off his ship came to a cave to pray. It's this same cave which forms the basis of the temple complex. There is also a huge ship's anchor which guides will tell you came from Sam Po's ship. It is however an anchor of the Dutch East Indies Company, but still, several hundred years old. Further on is a shrine to the admiral's helmsman who died whilst in port here.

The temple pagodas are a strange mix of Chinese and Muslim architecture. The swept black and red Oriental rooves are unmistakably Chinese, yet done in tiers reminiscent of early mosques. The supporting pillars depict grotesque and comical scenes from Taoist and Buddhist legend, yet next to the grave of the helmsman is a small mosque where Muslims will come to pray and to ask the blessings of the Muslim captain. The temple was renovated in the fifteenth century and again in the 18th century. In January of 1990 a flood in Semarang meant that the temple once again needed repairs. Thankfully through the aid of residents and supporters the temple has been maintained and is still an active place of worship for thousands of people each year. The temple plays host to several colourful festivals, especially around Chinese New Year.

A walk around the city's Chinatown confirms that Semarang has the highest percentage of ethnic Chinese inhabitants of any city in Indonesia. The narrow streets are crowded with interesting shop fronts, the fragrant smoke from joss sticks permeates the air, and temples are dotted around in unusual abundance. It's down an unlikely lane here that you will find the largest Chinese temple in the city area. Around dusk Tay Kak Sie is a hive of activity as devotees make offerings to the myriad of gods and spirits in the alcoves around the walls.

The old Dutch city (Kota Lama) is a charming remnant of the colonial era. Rows of terrace houses and shopfronts jostle with warehouses in a maze of backstreets and colonial buildings. The landmark here, and definitely worth a visit, is the historical Gereja Blenduk, an impressive copper-domed cathedral dating from 1745. The cathedral seats around four hundred in a central area, with a carved 'floating' pulpit, and a gleaming pipe organ that invokes all the spirit and zeal of every 'immanuel' ever sung beneath its shining rolls. The crowning glory is of course the dome, soaring above, it provides a fit



Semarang's charming colonial architecture.

ting cap for a glorious church. On the wall near the door is a complete list of the church's parsons, beginning with Johannes Willhelmus Swemmelaar in 1753, to Polii, the first Indonesian priest, in 1954, and on to the present day.

As a coastal city, Semarang has a busy port, somewhat of a smaller version of Jakarta's Sunda Kelapa. A marina was recently developed which is a pleasant place for a stroll in the balmy sea breeze. The focal point in the city is *simpang lima*, literally 'five ways,' which is a central park space encircled with markets, food stalls, shops and hotels. The other major landmark is an imposing two towered Dutch colonial building that was once the home of the Netherlands Indies Train Co. The building is known locally as *lawang sewu*, meaning 'thousand doors' due to its many outward facing doors. It dates from the 1920s. Another popular attraction in the city is Toko Oen (pronounced 'oon'), a Dutch restaurant dating from the 1930s which specialises in old style colonial cuisine. With its sombrely attired waiters, wicker furniture and slowly revolving ceiling fans, it exudes a distinguished air of colonial sophistication. Moving out of Semarang, the surrounding area has its own attractions. In Ambarawa, there is a railway museum of international acclaim. With examples of European-built trains from the 'Golden Age' of railways, the museum is definitely worth a visit for train buffs and travellers alike. Moving up into the mountainous area you'll find Semarang's answer to the Dieng Plateau. *Gedung Songo*, on the slopes of the foothills outside Semarang, has some of the oldest remaining temple ruins in Java. With nine temples in

Inside Gereja Blenduk with its impressive dome and baroque pipe organ.



all, these Hindu ruins date from the mid 700s. Set against a majestic backdrop of volcanic peaks, this area offers some of the best views of Central Java, in an ancient setting.

As the business capital of Central Java, Semarang plays host to large numbers of weary traders and entrepreneurs, many of them in the business of furniture manufacture and export. However with all its history, character and tourism options (including new ecotourism ventures in the surrounding hills) Central Java's capital is well placed to capture its fair share of the tourist traffic. For people who want to explore the surprising historical and natural attractions of Java, but prefer somewhere a bit quieter, Semarang provides a charming alternative. 🌊

Essential Info

The accommodation options in Semarang are plentiful. At the top of the list is the *Grand Candi Hotel* (024-416 222), a four star ex-Holiday Inn, adjacent to the Semarang Golf Club, and only minutes from the city centre. Grand Candi has an excellent Chinese Restaurant and nightly buffets in its relaxed cafe. Rooms are stylish and comfortable, and the lobby bar with live music is perfect for those pre-dinner aperitifs. Other hotels include *Hotel Ciputra* (024-449 888), ideally situated on the central square 'simpang lima,' with comfortable four star accommodation. Moving down the list *Hotel Santika* (024-444 777) provides adequate two star rooms, and the *Hotel Plaza* (024-473 188) is a good one star option. Dining options include *Cafe Oen* (024-541 683) for old-style ambience. *Miyako* (024-475 805) has tasty Japanese cuisine and try the *Ngalaras Rasa* (024-319 766) for local dishes. If you want to shake your stuff after dark try *Java Cafe* restaurant and pub; (024-357 3301) the funkier place in town. Garuda has three flights a day to Semarang.



Gereja Blenduk