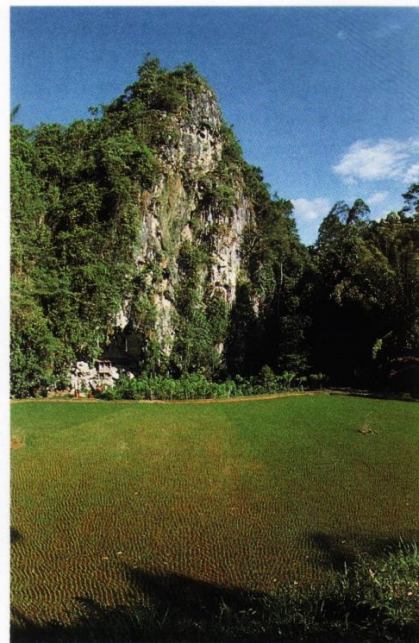


# Trans Sulawesi: Indonesia's long and winding road

Sulawesi, the former Celebes, consists of four long peninsulas joined at the southern boundary. In recent years, the Trans-Sulawesi Highway has linked Ujung Pandang in the south to Manado in the north. Story by **James Ritchie Grant**



**A**lthough it has a romantic ring to its name, this is no sanitised four-lane highway effortlessly swinging its way from plain to hill and down again. For all but 20km of its length it is only two lanes wide and only really suitable for small vehicles.

It is perhaps best to begin your journey at Manado, the small but thriving capital city of the northern province, as this will take you through the best part of the route before arriving at the flatter, more developed area south of Pare Pare. Manado is worth a few days on its own as it boasts quick access to excellent diving and several attractive hill towns.

Immediately on leaving Manado, the road climbs into Minahasa country where many large churches show the area's close tie to Christianity. It then ambles down to Rambang on the coast and back up through the hills to Kotamobagu before resuming a southward course to Issumi, a typical Indonesian village at the Gorontalo turn-off.

The highway crosses the Loba mountains and descends to Tilamuta for the run along the edge of Tomini Bay to Poso. If you have taken the 36-hour red-eye special you will probably want to stop at Poso and give your body and mind a rest. But if you have the stamina to continue for an hour and a quarter, take an "Angkutan Kota"—usually called Ankots, the new name for local transport—to Tentena on the northern end of Lake Poso. The road is tortuous but beautiful and



Tentena, at 600 metres, is a relatively cool, pleasant place to take a break.

The road climbs straight out of Tentena and equally quickly ceases to be a true two-lane road. Bends occur at an average of every 50 metres for the next 34km as the road swings you ever upwards, flanked by great peaks and deep, narrow valleys. There are constant reminders of the work required to maintain the road in the piles of stones and drums of bitumen

**Effigies of the dead are placed in cliff burial caves (top) overlooking rice fields; Torajaland funeral services are joyous occasions (above)**

cached along the route and one spectacular 100-metre stretch where the rock face has crumbled away in large pieces and crashed down on to and over the road into the ravine.

At the 34km marker it descends quickly to Tarika and a large flat rice-



producing valley. This gives you the feeling that the rest of the road will be similar but slowly it climbs again and in long sweeping curves takes you from untouched forests past small rice fields tucked into every available corner. The light green of the padi fields contrasts perfectly with the dark colours of the encroaching hillsides.

This section finally stops at Pendolo on the southern edge of Lake

Poso—the southern terminal of the daily ferry service to and from Tentena.

South of Pendolo the narrow road again climbs away from the lake but in long, slow curves through gentler country. The hills and valleys are larger than before and offer a different view until the road arrives above Mangkutana, crosses the ridge and descends rapidly into the town by repeatedly doubling back on itself.

A fast, flat road, which runs past tidy gardens and neat rice fields, brings us to Polopo, which offers regular sailings for the islands of the Togian Archipelago and Sulawesi Tenggara, the eastern arm of the island. It would be a good stopover if it were not for the fact that Rantepao, the main centre of Tana Toraja, is only about two hours away.

The distinctive Torajan style of buildings start appearing in increasingly larger numbers as the journey progresses. Tana Toraja is about 1000 metres above sea level and the countryside around Rantepao is delightful. Rantepao is surrounded by numerous burial sites, all of which are easily reached on foot or by organised tours. The Torajans have an elaborate funeral culture that involves burial in cliff graves and representations of the dead being displayed by means of clothed wooden effigies

housed in galleries cut out of the cliff face.

A good way to spend some time is to select a village at random and take local transport to it, at an average cost of about Rp 500 for the one-way trip. Bori is an excellent example, as it has standing stones and graves cut into massive boulders. From there it is only a short walk to Pangli and Rantepao.

On leaving Rantepao, the scenery again changes. The road undulates for about 20km before climbing into massive round-topped mountains, some of which appear to have split vertically.

There are deep valleys with large numbers of pine trees everywhere and, at the top of the Lakawan Pass, there are a number of good viewing points, most with food and drink stalls.

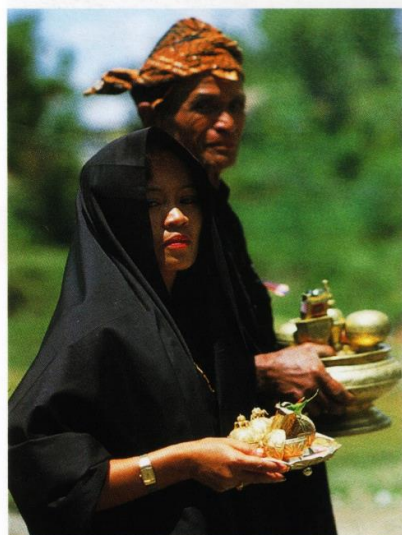
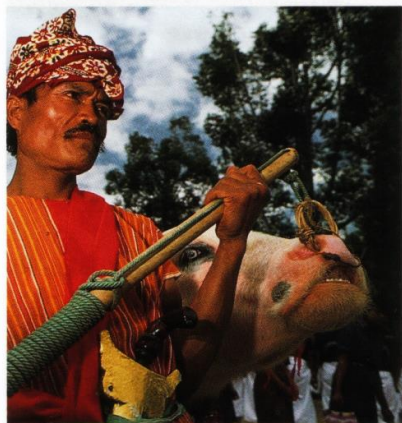
Tana Toraja has been left behind and we are in Bugis country, with its own distinctive style of housing. Five hours' drive from Rantepao is Pare Pare, the main town of the area, which lies around a magnificent, island-dotted bay filled with sailing ships interspersed with modern, derricked cargo vessels. Inshore are numerous large bamboo fishing traps.

On close inspection Pare Pare is a typical small Indonesian town strung along the bay's edge, with few of the

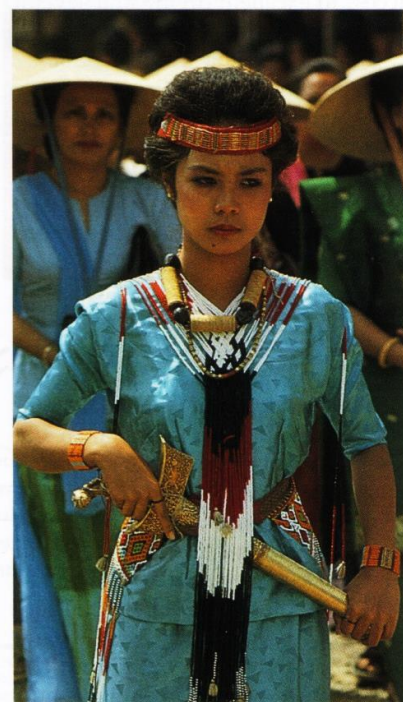
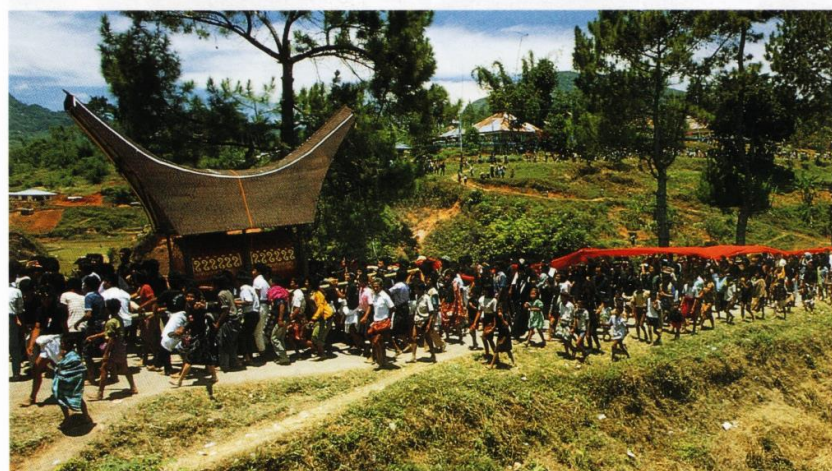
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*In central-southern Sulawesi, the people of Tana Toraja have an elaborate funeral culture*

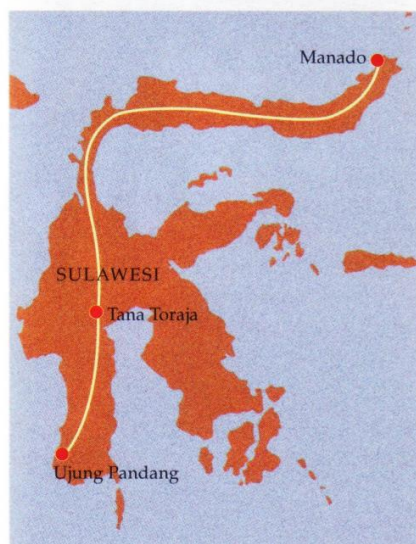
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**Toraja funeral scenes (anti-clockwise from top): water buffalo offering; relatives welcome guests; funeral procession; Toraja woman wearing traditional dress and kris**







buildings more than two storeys high. From here it is about two-and-a-half hours run to Ujung Pandang along what could be a fast road, if progress were not delayed by numerous small vehicles, cyclists, children and chickens.

However for the first 100km the road and the sea flirt with each other and villages and small cargo vessels can be seen every few kilometres. It is dissected by numerous rivers and flanked by rice fields and salt pans. Finally, outside Ujung Pandang Airport and just 20km from the city itself, the Trans-Sulawesi Highway lives up to its name and broadens to four lanes! However this section is heavily congested and soon fades away into the city, where our journey

comes to an end after 2500km of fascinating and frequently magnificent scenery.

Ujung Pandang is a large, modern town with only a limited number of places of interest. However, neither Paotere Harbour, with its assembly of variously-sized Phinisi sailing ships, nor Fort Rotterdam, built in 1545 then reconstructed in the 17th century, should be missed.

Public transport on the highway comes in two sizes—coaches that hold between 22 and 40 people in reasonable comfort and small Kijang, Suzuki, Mitsubishi and Daihatsu vans of the type visitors to Bali would be familiar with. The latter can carry up to 14 passengers in absolute discomfort for longer distances than you might

**A delight for travellers along the coastal areas of the Trans-Sulawesi Highway are spectacular sunsets; traditional architecture of Toraja**

care to imagine. The coach companies operate day and night services and the latter allow you to cover greater distances and save the price of a night's accommodation—but at a cost, as you will miss much of the scenery.

This is a most enjoyable journey and can be carried out either very cheaply or expensively according to inclination and the depth of your pocket.



*James Ritchie Grant is a writer based in West Australia; the pictures are Kal Muller's*