



Hideaway in the highlands

Annemarie Hollitzer visits the heart of the scenic homelands of the Minangkabau people in West Sumatra

All morning we bustled around the busy Bukittinggi market, bargaining for our souvenirs at the top level and climbing down the steep hill through stalls of potato crisps, red-hot chillies, dried fish and colourful displays of fruit and vegetables. Now we were looking forward to our weekend hideaway.

It was late afternoon when we finally headed out of Bukittinggi and the Agam valley. The swirling highland mists had already moved in, and by the time we reached Embun Pagi light rain was falling. From this small town on the crest of the ancient crater rim that surrounds Lake Maninjau, our rental car roller-coasted down the serpentine bends to Maninjau village. With our hearts in our mouths we squealed through one hairpin bend after another. Although the bends in

the road seemed innumerable, they were not—each one had a number and we had only just passed number 29. In all there are 44 heart-stopping curves with many vantage points offering spectacular views of the beautiful 17km-long lake.

Next morning the clear waters of Lake Maninjau extended like a huge silver sheet in front of our hotel balcony. Only the paddle strokes of a few fishermen in dugout canoes broke the smooth, shiny surface of the lake. At the water's edge, a cluster of houses, hotels and mosques sat in groves of coconut palms. Behind them rose the steep, 600-metre-high, jungle-covered crater walls that shelter the lake on all sides. A farmer, knee-deep in mud, ploughed his small plot of land in the traditional way, with the help of one buffalo, but the huge white satellite

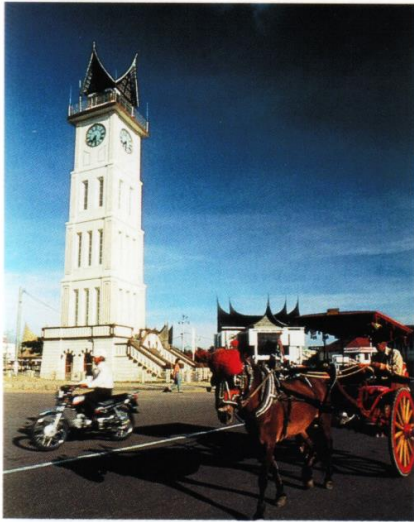
Dance performance at the Pusako Rumah Gadang, Payakumbuh



dish crowning his simple house marked the changing times.

The tranquillity of Lake Maninjau is perfect for a few days of relaxation, walking and swimming, and there are canoes and other boats for hire to explore the lake. One can also sightsee by joining the locals on the small boats that regularly leave Maninjau for other lakeside villages.

Although the coastal city of Padang is West Sumatra's provincial and commercial capital, the town of Bukittinggi in the Bukit Barisan highlands is its cultural heart. Bukittinggi means "high hill" and the town is spectacularly located, 900m above sea level, in the centre of the Agam valley, one of the three fertile valleys that make up the ancient homeland of the friendly Minangkabau people. This beautiful highland region is studded with soaring volca-



Jam Gadang (top) towers over Bukittinggi; a canoeist (top right) on Lake Maninjau; a farmer (above) ploughs his fields on the shores of Lake Maninjau; a Minang woman (right) wearing the buffalo-horn-inspired *tanduk* head-dress

noes, shimmering crater lakes and emerald-green rice-fields.

Thanks to its altitude Bukittinggi is pleasantly cool, so it is no wonder the Dutch chose it as the site for an army post. In 1825, during the Paderi wars, they built a fortification on a steep hill and called it Fort de Kock. This also became the name of the town. Today little remains of the fort, but it is worth a visit for the splendid views from its lookout tower of Bukittinggi and the fiery Mount Merapi. Another reminder from colonial times is the Jam Gadang, the lofty clock tower that has become Bukittinggi's landmark.

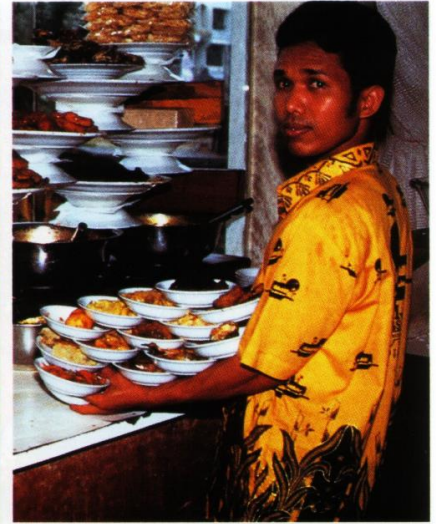
Great views abound in Bukittinggi and another popular vantage point is Panorama Park, overlooking the Ngarai Sianok Canyon, and its backdrop of

Mount Singgalang. This canyon is the most famous part of the tectonic rift valley that runs the length of Sumatra, from Semangko Bay to Aceh.

Throughout the verdant valleys that surround Bukittinggi rise the sharply pointed gables of the unusual Minang *rumah gadang* (big house). The many separate apartments in these large houses were traditionally inhabited by a matriarch and her children and grandchildren.

From a distance, it seems as if every inch of the outer walls of a *rumah gadang* has been covered in finely detailed mosaic. However, a closer look reveals that the exquisite decorations





A market display (above) of fresh vegetables; a waiter (above right) at a Padang restaurant; view over the Ngarai Sianok Canyon (below) from Bukittinggi's Panorama Park

are carved in wood and then painted. Imbued with symbolism, the designs are mostly inspired by plants but there are also some based on animal forms. Strict rules apply to their application, with special patterns for window sills, rafters and other parts of the house. Certain motifs symbolise humility and courtesy, others the difference between good and evil. These act as a guide to proper behaviour.

The multi-peaked roofs adorning the large rectangular *rumah gadang* resemble the shape of buffalo horns. About 600 years ago a huge Javanese army threatened to attack the greatly outnumbered Minang people. To escape the uneven battle, the Minang proposed instead a contest between two buffaloes.

On the day of the combat, the Javanese brought an enormous beast while the Minang produced a scrawny, half-starved calf. Secretly delighted, the Javanese overlooked that the shrewd Minang had tied a sharp knife to the calf's snout. The battle began, but in an instant it was over. In its frantic search for food, the ravenous calf promptly gored the soft underbelly of its huge opponent. This victory not only inspired the use of horn-shaped roof gables but it also gave the people its name, Minangkabau, from *minang* (victorious) and *kabau* (buffalo).

The saddle-shaped, pointed roofs have come to symbolise Minang architecture and today the theme of buffalo horns is repeated in many public

buildings. This favourite design also appears in the *tanduk*, a two-pronged ceremonial head-dress worn by Minang women.

Although some young couples choose to live in conventional houses, around Payakumbuh, in the Limapuluh Kota valley east of Bukittinggi, about 2000 traditional houses still remain. In this area, the Minangkabau Cultural Centre, with its impressive Pusako Rumah Gadang, is a popular tourist destination. The centre is an open-air museum where locals pound rice, forge tools and practise handicrafts. Spectacular performances of traditional dance are also held here. One is a Minang version of the *pencak silat*, where men combine dance and martial arts, while the dances performed by women are more gentle and graceful. Minang maidens dressed in colourful traditional clothes excel at the *tari piring* (plate dance), *saputangan* (handkerchief dance) and the *tari gelombang* (wave dance).

While the striking *rumah gadang* ar-

chitecture has brought renown to the Minangkabau people, they are perhaps even more famed for their fiery food. Thanks to the *merantau*, the Minang tradition where men leave their families to seek their fortune abroad, the popular Padang cuisine is now available around the world.

In the window of a typical Padang restaurant a huge array of mouth-watering coconut-based curries tempts the passer-by and, once lured inside, it is a joy to watch the thrilling performance of skilful waiters gliding along the floor balancing dozens of dishes along their arms.

Another interesting feature of the Minangkabau is their ancient matrilineal society. The Minang still trace their descent through the lineage of their women.

Inheritance follows the same rule and valuable property, rice-fields and the family home all belong to women.

When a man marries his Minang bride, he enters her clan, although this does not necessarily mean that





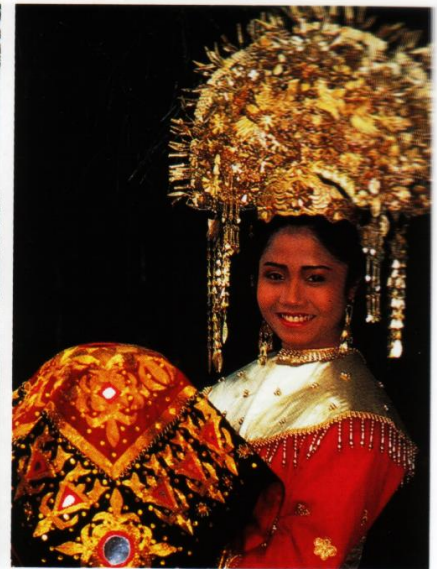
**Traditional *rumah gadang* (above);
Minang woman (right) dressed to receive
honoured guests**

he moves in with his wife. Traditionally men lived in a *surau*, a special men's house, and they often spent more time at their mother's house than with their wife.

With so much economic power in the hands of the women, it is perhaps not surprising that Minang men go to try their luck away from the home-

land. While once the *merantau* only lasted for a few years, today, due to population pressure and the scarcity of land, it often means a lifetime away from the Minang highlands. So when modern men decide to migrate they usually invite their family to come along.

Judging by the high proportion of women in the Bukittinggi region however, many capable Minang matriarchs have chosen to stay behind to look



after the family's home and paddy-fields.

This beautiful Minangkabau homeland has not only captured the hearts of the women; no matter how far a Minang man may venture in his search of fortune, he'll always call these highlands home. G

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