

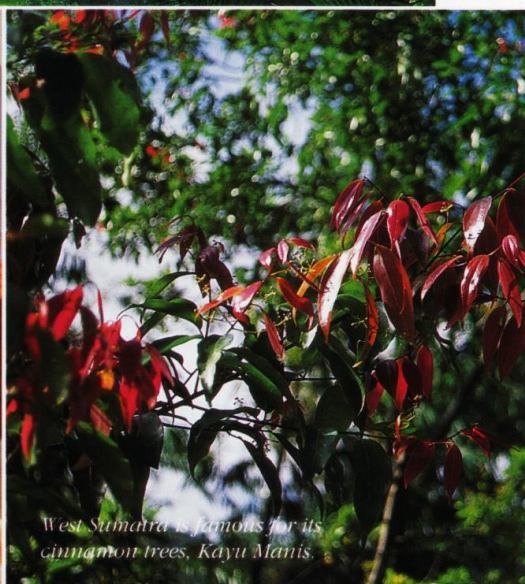


*Ngarat Sianok Canyon*

The highlands of West Sumatra have a chequered history. Legend has it, that around the 13th century, before the time of reliable records, a Javanese king launched an attack on the region. The outnumbered Minangkabau (often shortened to *Minang*) proposed an alternative to armed combat. A contest between two buffaloes should be held to decide the victor. The Javanese agreed and chose a huge Javanese bull as their champion. The Sumatrans cunningly selected a young calf which had not eaten for days. To its nose, (or its horns in some accounts) was fixed a sharp knife. When the calf went to suckle, it sliced open the belly of the larger bull, thus winning the contest. The jubilant Sumatrans declared "Minang Kabau" or the winning bull, and thus a legend, and an enduring legacy of national pride was born.

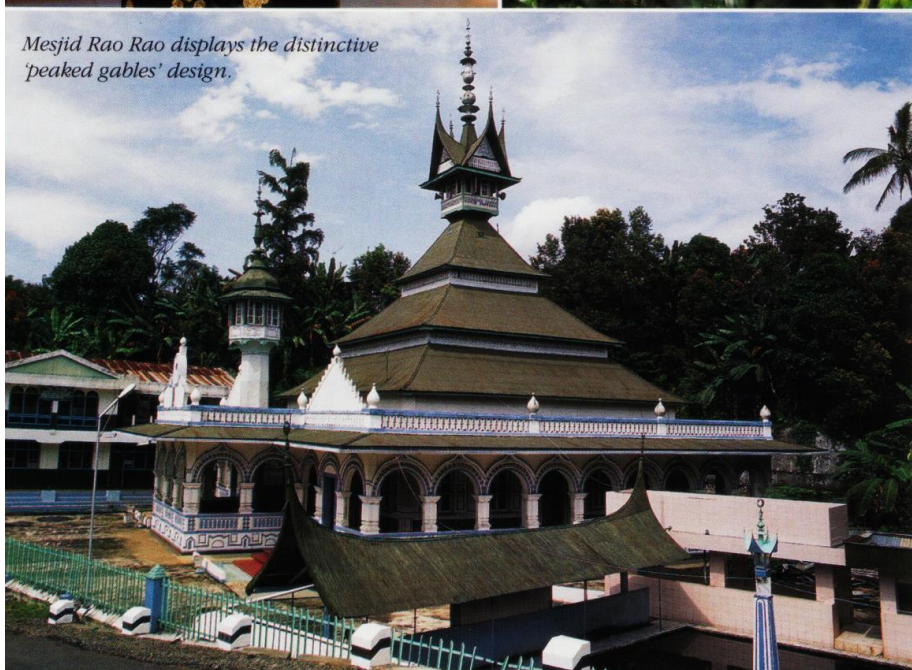


*Pas Ambaban or the 'Welcome Dance'*



*West Sumatra is famous for its cinnamom trees, Kayu Manis.*

*Mesjid Rao Rao displays the distinctive 'peaked gables' design.*



Since ancient times, West Sumatra has produced large quantities of gold. The whole island was once known as Svarnadvipa or 'island of gold'. In the 16th century, gold from West Sumatra attracted traders of fine cloth from as far as Northern India. With them came Islam. Around the same time, the northern region of Aceh, already staunchly Islamic, began to assert control over the Minang. For several decades all trade went through Acehnese channels, and thus cemented the conversion to the Muslim faith. In 1663, the Dutch gained control of the area and its important trading links, and built a fort on the Batang Arau River to consolidate their position.

During the Napoleonic Wars, the area came under British control, and it was at this time that Stamford Raffles, the famed founder of Singapore and distinguished naturalist, made his journey to the region.

The Japanese occupied the region for a brief period in World War II. And during the revolution period Bukittinggi was briefly the nation's capital as the seat of an emergency government.

The Minangkabau culture is a rare example of a matrilineal society. The 'rumah gadang' (big house) with their distinctive peaked gables are the foundation of the family unit, and, the property of women. Inheritance and descent depend mainly on one's mother rather than father. This practice did not always sit well with strict Muslim adherents, and led to clashes between *Paderis*, Muslim teachers, and the Minang. Tradition and religion have usually been able to arrive at a compromise though. One such compromise has been that, inherited wealth be be-



queathed according to Minang matrilineal tradition, and earned wealth be divided according to Muslim law. A good example of how traditional customs can adapt to new influences.

The real seat of Minangkabau culture is Bukittinggi. Situated at 900m above sea level, Bukittinggi is a delightful town with a cool climate and a relaxed pace. Visitors can sit and drink coffee in friendly cafes, and while away the hours. Or for the adventurous, the nearby peaks of Marapi and Singgalang await your ascent. There are also a wealth of sites and attractions to keep anyone busy. The town's main landmark is the Jam Gadang or 'big clock', commonly referred to as Bukittinggi's Big Ben. There's also a colourful market in the middle of town which is a great place to practice your bargaining skills. 'I crossed the equator' type T-shirts are quite popular at this latitude. Formerly known as 'Fort de Kock', Bukittinggi is home to the ruins of this 19th century Dutch fortification. This is a great vantage point for shutterbugs to get that perfect sunset shot. Ngarai Sianok Canyon is part of a tectonic rift valley which runs the length of the island. With spectacular sheer cliffs, winding rivers and dense jungle vegetation this is a great place to explore on foot. There is also a series of eery underground caves, built by the Japanese, during their occupation of the area; very intriguing and well worth a look.

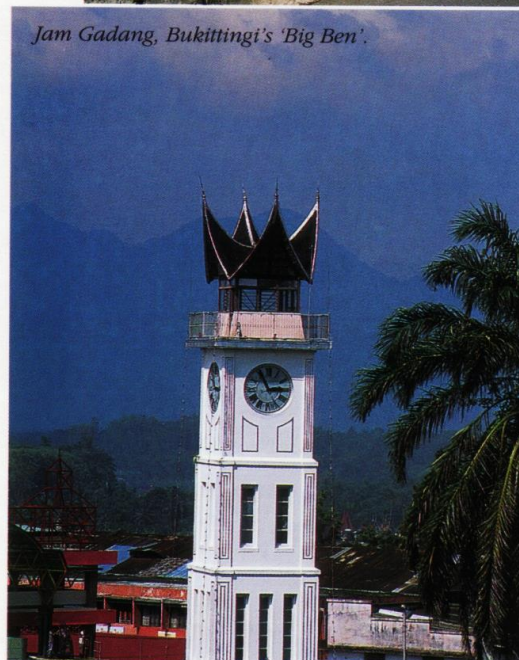
The Minang culture has a lively colourful aspect that rivals anything on Bali, and Bukittinggi is definitely the place to check it out. Live dance performances are held virtually every night and they are not to be missed. The Minang have their own form of *pencak silat*, a combination of dance and martial arts, which usually forms part of any dance performance. Then there is the unforgettable *tari piring* or plate dance where the dancer not so much dances, as jumps, on a pile of broken plates. An inspection of their feet will, incredibly, usually reveal no injury.

The most special part of any visit to West Sumatra though, is the people. The Minang are friendly and hospitable, and for visitors who show an interest in their spectacular culture, they are delightfully accommodating. Who knows, you may even find yourself being invited to one of their famously elaborate Minang weddings. But then that will be just another treasured memory to take home from your trip to West Sumatra - home of the 'victorious buffalo'.

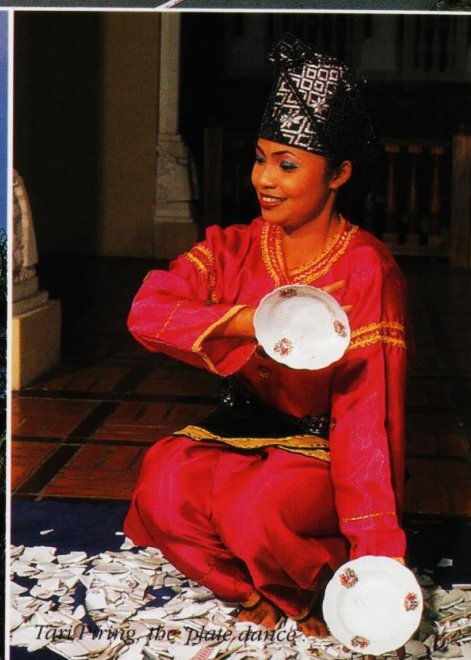
*Garuda Indonesia has three flights a day to Padang in West Sumatra.*



*Sungai Tarab, a traditional Minangkabau village.*



*Jam Gadang, Bukittinggi's 'Big Ben'.*



*Tari Piring, the Plate dance.*



*Pencak Silat, a blend of dance and martial arts.*