



Konderatu's palette

The coloured lakes of Kelimutu on Flores have been a draw for tourists since colonial times. Story and photographs by **Annemarie and Holli Hollitzer**

Long and slender, like a snake, the island of Flores stretches 360km through East Nusa-tenggara. Named Cabo das Flores (Cape of Flowers) by a Portuguese explorer in 1544, the island is one of the most beautiful in Indonesia.

The Flores Road, built by the Dutch in 1926 with local forced labour, runs through exceptional scenery from Labuhanbajo in the west to Larantuka in the east. Groves of palm trees and emerald green rice-fields alternate with dramatic volcanoes, deep valleys and raging rivers. And in this world of natural wonders the three coloured lakes of Kelimutu, resting deep in stark crater settings, have attracted and fascinated tourists since colonial times.

It's late afternoon when we drive into the small village of Moni in the heart of the Lio region. Lining the main road are rows of simple homestays that have sprung up to cater for today's young international travellers, drawn here by the fame of Kelimutu. Moni, less than 15km from the lakes, is the best base for a dawn ascent of the mountain.

The hilly, scenic region around Moni is renowned for its attractive *ikat* weaving in rusty reds and shades of indigo. Nggela, the most famous of the weaving villages, produces some of the finest shawls and sarongs on Flores.

Created on handlooms, many cloths are still woven from handspun cotton and dyed with natural colours.

Three local people wait for the early morning mist to clear and reveal the coloured splendour of the trio of lakes

Although Nggela's chief renown comes from its stunning *ikat*, its superb location on a hilltop overlooking the coast comes a close second. The road to this traditional village passes through two more *ikat* centres, Jopu and Wolojita.

Long before dawn we stumble out of our tiny room in Moni to start the drive to Kelimutu. Our first concern is the weather and we anxiously scan the black night sky until we glimpse the first faint light of the stars. It is mid-March and the wet season is coming to an end, but with a few showers persisting we are by no means confident that we'll get to see the fabled lakes.

Our four-wheel drive winds its way up the steep hills. We have almost reached our destination when a fallen tree blocks the road. We're forced to leave our car, crawl under the obstacle and continue the last stretch on foot. Up here, there is no sign of the flickering stars we glimpsed at Moni. The night air is cold and damp. Thick clouds sweep down

the hillside, making it almost impossible to see the way ahead.

By the weak beam from our torch we cautiously follow the path which leads to the final staircase. At the end of the steep steps we arrive at a crumbling concrete lookout. We're now 1690 metres high and from here we should be able to see all three lakes—if the spirit of Konderatu will let us.

The souls of Konderatu and his wife, Bobi, are the spiritual owners of these lakes and once this area was an important ritual site. Large-scale sacrifices of water buffalo and pigs stopped only 50 or so years ago because of the increasing influence of the Catholic Church.

The only thing we can see are the intermittent, faint lights from the torches of other hopeful visitors making their way up the mountain. Most are young European backpackers who have come up in the truck run daily from Moni by the Catholic Church. Visiting the coloured lakes of Kelimutu is a must on the Flores backpacker trail.

A chilly wind blows from the east and we shiver and huddle together for warmth. The sky is lightening but there is still no glimpse of the lakes. Wreaths of grey clouds swirl past.

It is an eerie atmosphere and we can't help thinking of the man who disappeared here only a year ago. He was last seen climbing along the jagged volcanic ridge surrounding one of the lakes. Then he was swallowed up by the mist and never seen again.

Suddenly the grey curtain parts and reveals the smooth surface of the large blue-green lake below. Just beyond, we can make out the dark maroon wedge-shape of a second lake, but before we have time to focus our cameras the view is gone again.

By now it is raining and we're chilled to the bone. Perhaps we should



have considered bringing a suitable offering to Konderatu. A pig, maybe some rice, tuak (palm wine) or betel nut might have helped.

There is a strong spiritual quality up here that is hard to explain. Workers maintaining the road tell stories of how at times an unseen force has hurled them into the mud and how their tools have been mysteriously

The lakes of Kelimutu are essential viewing for young travellers on their way through Flores

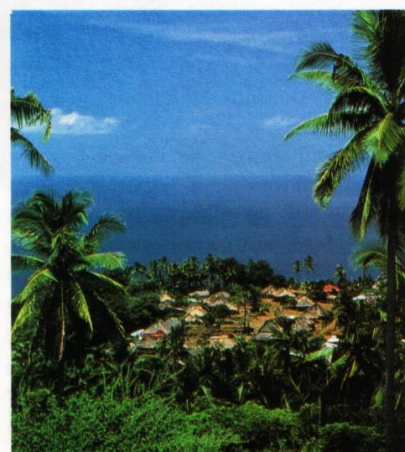
ripped out of their hands. When this happens offerings to placate Konderatu become necessary.

Or perhaps the eerie presence comes from the many souls of the dead who, according to local belief, inhabit these lakes. The small circular black lake is believed to be the resting place of thieves and murderers; the other two hold the souls of the old and the young.

Legend tells how on special nights the spirits of the dead leave their resting place in the lakes to wander across the mountainside.

Finally, our patience is rewarded. The sun breaks through the thick mist and reveals the full splendour of the three coloured lakes of Kelimutu. In their deep settings inside the rugged





Rice planting (top) near Moni village; Nggela (above) is a coastal village famed for its ikat weaving (left)

volcanic craters, they shimmer like precious stones.

The exquisite turquoise surface of the nearest one is laced with swirls of yellow sulphur, and fleeting shadows of the clouds race across the water. Next to the turquoise lake, separated by a thin, low rock wall, lies the dark maroon lake, so dark that at times it appears almost black. Only in full sun does it reveal its true colour. Behind us, set apart from the others, and still partly obscured by the mist, looms the sinister black lake.

The unusual and puzzling feature of these lakes is the phenomenon of their changing colours. Long ago, reports of the crater lakes described them as white, red and black, while as

recently as 10 or 15 years ago their colours were dark red, green and blue.

Then, in a transformation via dark green and white, the red lake turned light green. The green lake changed to turquoise and the blue one turned

Why the lakes change colour every few years baffles scientists, although there is no shortage of theories

black. And on the current 5000-rupiah note, today's maroon lake is coloured bright red while the black lake is featured in green.

The mystery of these metamor-

phoses still baffles scientists and there are varying theories about what could cause the dramatic colour changes. One possibility is that, over time, the lakes eat their way deeper into the surrounding crater walls and, as they do, different minerals are leached out that could cause these changes.

Another theory is that, in the depths of the volcano, the lakes are connected to each other through channels. While Western scientists rack their brains for answers, the Florinese believe that the colour transformations are the ancestral spirits' way of sending them messages. G

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