

# Sunny side down



At this time of year, the usually stunning sunrise over Mount Bromo can be an overcast, non-event. However, there are still plenty of other reasons to visit this magnificent area, according to **Rosalinda Corazon** and **Agung Guritno**

**I**t's 3.30am. Bleary eyed, you stir. You pull on every layer of clothing you have, then find your way to a waiting jeep.

Along with other tourists, you bounce about as your transport ascends the steep mountain slopes of Mount Penanjakan. You huddle in the dark to await a reputedly spectacular event, the renowned sunrise over the smoking volcanic crater of Mount Bromo. You wait. And wait. First light. Second light. Third light. Oh, it's light. Where's the colour? Where are the fireworks? Where's the cause for applause? Ah. Too much cloud. White-out.

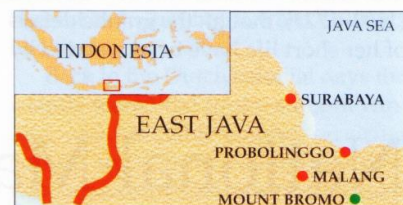
Blanket wrapped tight around you,

you shuffle back to the jeep, hoping to return to town in time to make the bus down to Probolinggo, for the connection to your next destination. What could possibly be the hurry?

Here you are, in the midst of a mystical land, a place of timeless and incredible beauty, tended by people who live a way of life virtually unchanged for centuries. Must you leave so soon?

From November to March, the rainy season, this sunrise scenario is played out, day after day, in the main tourist area of Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park.

Some sunrise-seekers may allow



**Top: view of Ngadisari village from Mount Penanjakan**

for a second day, to repeat the exercise by crossing the desert plain, known as the sea of sand, to Mount Bromo's volcanic crater. Or they "do" the crater the first day, Mount Penanjakan the second. But the outcome is often the same. No dazzling burnt-orange skylines. First it is dark, then it is light. Everyone then takes a jeep back down to a hot breakfast, before heading out of town.

The point is, when it comes to the splendours of the Mount Bromo region, burnt-orange sunrises are far from the only point.





Clockwise from above: foxglove flowers; Ngadisari village is known for its colourful hues; Mount Bromo's smoking crater; view across the sea of sand to Mount Bromo

It is a great idea to start a day at Mount Bromo by joining the sunrise-seekers. There is a chance the production will do the gods proud, and it would be a shame to miss it.

Whatever the colours as dark becomes light, however, the show has just begun.

At 2774m above sea level, Mount Penanjakan is a most spectacular place from which to view the early morning's glory.

As the mists begin to roll, the clouds work in shifts to conceal and reveal an extraordinary landscape across a sea of sand, green from the season's frequent rains and graced by the sur-

real Pura Agung Hindu temple. Mount Bromo's crater rises behind the temple, beside the gentle folds of neighbouring Mount Batok.

In the background is Mount Semeru, which at 3676m above sea level is the highest mountain in Java.

Semeru erupts every 15 to 30 minutes. In November, 1997, it erupted 2990 times. Apart from the occasional outburst, Bromo just smokes continuously, its exhalations joining the rapidly evolving cloudscape.

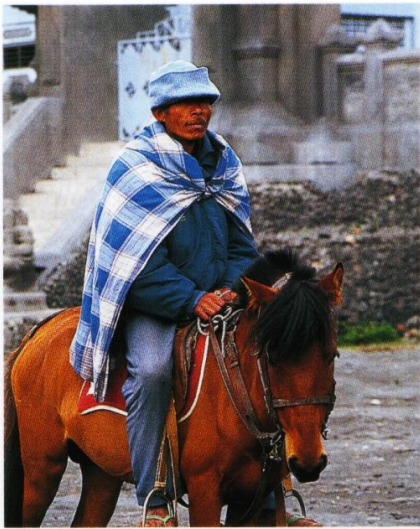
Cemara Lawang village and the surrounding patchwork countryside stop abruptly at the drop to the sea of sand. Around to the right is a brilliant

blue outlook from Mount Penanjakan to the north coast of Java and the Madura Strait.

The weather, freezing in the early morning, will warm rapidly as you make your way on foot back down the mountain road. Delight in the sensual awakening of drops of rain on flowers and trees, of fragrant pine and wild-flower blends, of singing birds and shuffling nature.

Part-way down the road, you can turn on to a scenic track that will take you back to Cemara Lawang. One of the few tourists on the track, you will pass farmers working the fields and people gathering grass to sell to the horsemen.





A tune may follow you on the morning breeze as a farmer whistles a traditional song. Walk quietly; look left, you may see monkeys swinging through the treetops. In the mountain air, you will feel truly revived.

Walking around country roads is one of the region's great pleasures. Stroll through Ngadisari village, painted in bright colours, and marvel at the contrast to the conservative style of many Indonesians.

Stand back to watch children at play with home-made toys, horsemen tending their horses after taking people to the crater, farmers tending crops of big frilly cabbages, giant spring onions, potatoes, corn, tomatoes and cauliflower.

In the Tengger region, agriculture is developed on seemingly impossible slopes. Have time to take it all in. You may even sense the spiritual presence that has inspired this district for centuries.

Mount Bromo is a fascinating op-

**Clockwise from above: the Tenggerese are diligent farmers; the horsemen rise at 2am; farming near-impossible slopes; waiting for passengers in front of the Pura Agung Hindu Temple**

portunity to see inside an active volcano. Whether before sunrise, or through the day, cross the sea of sand on foot or horseback and climb the 249 steps to the crater's rim.

In the early morning, you will be joined by many other enthusiasts, wending their way up the side for a view of the smoking grey mud and the spectacle of the rising sun.

Next to Mount Bromo, Mount Batok is also worth a climb. Its flat top is covered by flowering plants, and it affords another perspective of the Bromo crater. Reached by a well-kept path, Mount Batok is a mystical, peaceful setting.

If you would rather ride than walk, rent a horse for several hours, with or without the accompanying owner, and explore the extraordinary sea of sand, eight to 10 kilometres in diameter.

It is best to explore the district in







the morning, then to relax in the afternoon, when rain may set in.

Curl up with a book, or talk with friends old or new, as you sip hot wine or traditional *wedang jahe*, ginger tea.

Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park is more than 50,000 hectares in area. There are four lakes in the region.

Rent a jeep or a motorbike for a day trip to the gentle setting of Ranu (Lake) Kumbolo. At 14 hectares, this is the region's biggest lake, home to some of the park's 600 species of flora, 22 species of mammals, 85 bird species and six reptile species.

The sun also sets, sometimes with

#### A tilled field ready for planting

more aplomb than it rises. In Cemara Lawang, sit on a bench at the rim of the caldera and view a one-of-a-kind evening as the clouds roll by and the sun departs.

After the rewards of independent discovery, you may decide to continue doing it your way. When finally it is time for you to move on, perhaps rent a jeep and ask the driver to take you along the beautiful scenic route, through savannah lands and lush stretches of jungle, to Malang.

As you climb winding mountain roads, you will note the scarcity of other vehicles. Pause to appreciate your surroundings whenever the desire strikes you.

This is your adventure.

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## The Tenggerese

Since the beginning of the Majapahit Kingdom, the Tengger mountain region has been a holy area for Hindus. A carved stone from the tenth century tells of the year AD929 and of the village Walandit, a holy place in the region of Tengger Mountain, inhabited by people known as Hulun Abdi, servants of the spirits.

In the thirteenth century, when the Majapahit kingdom was in decline, and other Hindus were heading for Bali, Tenggerese people settled in the Bromo Tengger Semeru area. Today's Tenggerese know Mount Bromo as a place of blessing of Hyang Widhi Wasa, a manifestation of the Hindu god Brahma.

The sand sea is the short-cut for the human soul of the dead body, so that it may travel through purity to become holy before it passes to heaven.

Titi Luri is to follow the elder generations' lead in ritual and customs. The Tenggerese adhere to traditional customs, believing deeply in *roh halus* (powerful things), sacred places and traditional myths. Centuries-old ceremonies take place almost every

month, the best known being Kasada. The Tenggerese connection to ancient Hindus is evident in *prasen*, the equipment used in religious ceremonies for holy water. Made from bronze, and carved with gods and zodiacs of the Hindu religion, some *prasen* date from the Majapahit kingdom.

Each group of people in Tenggerese society is led by a *dukun*, a medicine man. He is elected by the people, but must be a married man and a descendant of a *dukun*, as well as a master of incantation and custom.

In marriage, Tengger people tend to choose their own partners, with rules that they must not have even a great-great grandmother in common. Partners from outside Tengger society are welcome. They will still be accepted as people of Tengger.

Tenggerese are diligent farmers, working side-by-side regardless of gender. Women and men hoe and harvest the fields, split and cart firewood, care for the horses and gather grass to sell to the horsemen. The horsemen rise around 2am to take the day's tourists to Bromo's crater. In addition



Warm from head to toe in a Javanese sarong

to grass, their horses are fed *jamu* (traditional medicine), honey and egg, to give them power to start work every day at 3am.

Tenggerese people work hard and live safely, simply and peacefully. They speak their own dialect, Java Tengger, and dress in distinctive, colourful clothing, including their ever-practical, ever-present Javanese sarongs: richly coloured pieces of batik which are joined at the ends to form circular wraps.—RC & AG