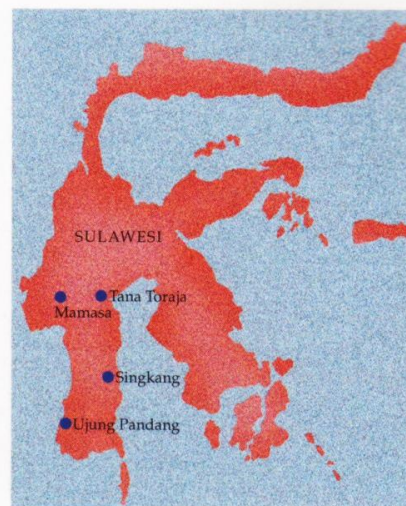


# Sulawesi strolling

On foot is a fine way to see Sulawesi, even if it can seem like a long time between showers.

**Matthew Biggs** put his best foot forward



An old rusting truck was not what I had expected to find at the top of the mountain pass. But here it was, with no visible means of access except the tricky footpath that I had just used. The jungle had comprehensively reclaimed any truck route that had once existed and now it was swallowing the rusting hulk before me.

Welcome to Sulawesi, the crab-shaped Indonesian province that lies just north of the equator.

I was headed towards Tana Toraja, often regarded as the cultural heartland of a culturally-diverse island and a region that is easily reached by road or air from the capital of the province, Ujung Pandang.

Bus travel is easy in Sulawesi but can be uncomfortable. Completing the last part of my journey on foot was one way to take control and get a taste of life in the mountains.

The trail began outside the little town of Mamasa, high in the hills of central Sulawesi. The narrow road into the area switched back constantly as it rose away from the heat of the coast and into the mist of an approaching mountain valley. All around were ferns, from small varieties to three-metre Man Ferns that reared up from the mountainside. Finally, at a height of 1000 metres, the countryside levelled out to reveal clearer air and the broad Mamasa valley.

The area reflects the ethnic diversity of Sulawesi, with Mandarese in the west, Bugis in the east and Torajan to the north. Also called West Torajans, it is this last group that inhabits the Mamasa valley, providing a link with the more frequently visited Torajaland to the north-east.



An old track through the hills joins the two areas and it was this route that I intended to take.

My first day began at 5.00am with the twin wake-up calls of the mosque and mellow guitar music. Mamasa is known for the popularity of its guitar and singing groups; practice begins at dawn and takes no account of visiting

In the fertile Mamasa valley. Across the valley are the lower slopes of the 2865m high Mount Mambulilin

travellers. Before leaving, I wanted to visit the hot springs on the edge of town. A heavy mist lay about the streets, making it hard to see individual buildings. As this was the only

source of hot water for miles, laundry chores appeared to be more popular than a recreational soak. I stayed long enough to get wet and to watch the peak of Gunung Mambulilin rise up from the fog that obscured most of the valley floor. Then it, too, disappeared as the mist rose and the town around me came into view.

At 2865m, Gunung Mambulilin dominates the Mamasa valley. From the valley floor, the waterfalls of Mambulilin Sarambu can be seen on the slopes of the mountain, a flash of white among the jungle green. I had to get a move on, however; much as I wanted to walk around the valley, I was meant to be walking out of it.

First stop on the trail was the village of Rantebuda. Like many local

settlements, Rantebuda has retained much of its traditional architecture. The houses, called *banua sura*, are more elongated than the famed *tongkanan* "houses of origin" in nearby Torajaland. Although lacking the water buffalo horn adornments of the latter, each *banua sura* is covered with carved panels and features a wooden water buffalo head, a horse head or, occasionally, human figures.

After leaving the village, I faced a long walk up to the pass that would take me out of the valley. A minibus passed in a flurry of waving arms and with much horn-blowing. It was twice as wide as the track and as it disappeared into the jungle the path became frighteningly rutted and narrow.

Although not steep, the humidity

and searing sun made the climb exhausting work. Long pants and plenty of water were necessities. A rampant chorus of cicadas accompanied me through the forest, so loud that I thought I would have to shout to greet anyone I might meet.

At the summit, I was rewarded with a view that resembled a churning green sea—mountains and a deep valley that would take me into Torajaland.

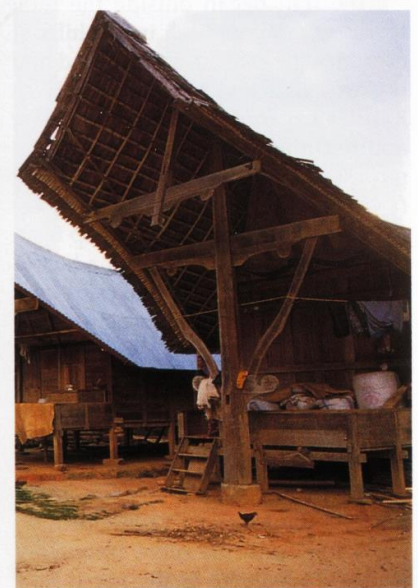
Local farmers had attempted to tame the steep slopes. The gradient here makes rice cultivation impossible, even using narrow terraces, so coffee, tobacco and bananas are grown as cash crops on small areas of cleared jungle. Tobacco leaves were hanging outside every little home and the parched surface of the path was frequently covered with coffee beans drying in the sun.

By mid afternoon, I had reached the village of Timbaan where I had planned to spend the night. There were only 10 houses and all were made of timber; the mosque was reverently constructed of stone. The track passed right through the village and the daily activities of several families. It was a menagerie of goats, pigs, cows, one horse, several naked children and myself, a tired visitor.

My first call was the village shower to cool off. This entailed visiting a small bamboo cubicle that had been



Ornate carvings (left) decorate the gable on the high house at Rantebuda village; traditional high-gabled dwellings (below) in the village of Paku



constructed, disconcertingly, beside the main path.

Even with the entire village and the mountain range in view, privacy was guaranteed and, standing under a split length of bamboo that funnelled water directly from the hillside, it felt like the best shower ever.

The next day I set off early to try and beat the heat. With more clouds around I hoped to avoid the roasting of the day before. The few local people that I passed appeared to be doing the same journey as a matter of course and in a fraction of the time that I was taking.

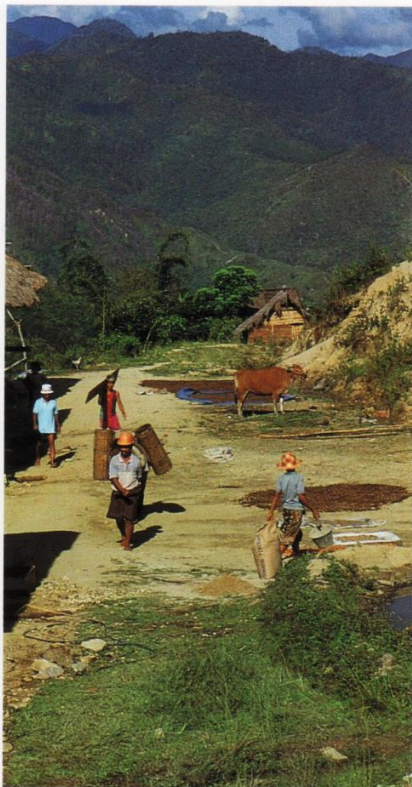
From Timbaan the path goes down the mountain, switching back constantly and barely providing space for one man to pass. Soon after passing the village of Mawai, I found myself on the valley floor where the track began to widen as it followed the course of a river.

Judging from the tyre marks on the ground I was now back within the outer reaches of the internal combustion engine, although I pitied the driver who had to squeeze a vehicle onto such a small track. These multi-lane footpaths provide vital links for many rural settlements.

A bridge carried the path over the river and was set high above the water for protection against the seasonal floods that rip along the valley floor. This was the river Masupu and during my walk along it the water was still urgent and in a big hurry, despite the lack of rain. Beyond the eddies that swirled beneath the structure, pools had formed among huge boulders that slowly make their way downstream with every monsoon. Now, in the dry season, they had appeared from the channel to create waterholes and even a small beach. It was the perfect place for a lunchtime swim.

It was a tough restart—straight uphill with the sun back up to its blistering best. As I left two young boys appeared with bunches of unidentifiable foliage that they had been gathering in the hills. Seeing me, both left their work and decided to display their prowess by leaping from the top of the 15m-high bridge. Putting on a display for the wandering foreigner provided an excuse to stop work and cool off in the river.

My goal for the day was the village of Paku, located on a small plateau that overlooked the valley and



mountains through which I had just passed. High-gabled houses sat in a neat line opposite their rice barns, which were built on polished stilts to prevent rats from getting at the stores. Their profiles were spectacular against the sinking sun.

The sunset was dragging the heat of the day with it and the swift arrival of an evening chill made the village shower feel a little more than refreshing. A chorus of frogs began in the paddy field behind me, greeting the dusk with what sounded like one con-

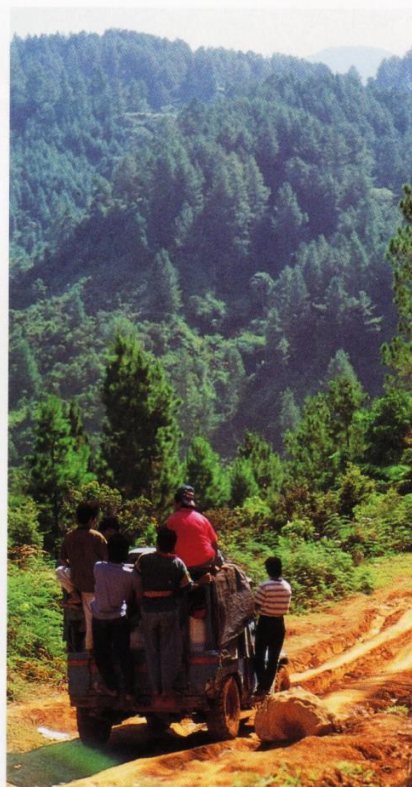
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*Standing under a split length of bamboo that funnelled water directly from the hillside, it felt like the best shower ever*

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tinuous croak, as I returned to my room for a lamplit dinner of rice and vegetables.

In contrast to the few people I had seen so far, my progress on day three was almost threatened by overcrowding. The final part of the walk was to the town of Bittuang in Tana Toraja. It was market day and everybody appeared to be going there. People mysteriously emerged on tracks from villages that were hidden in the shade of



**The village of Timbaan (above left) on the trail to Tana Toraja; a jeep laden with people and produce makes its way carefully to the market in Bittuang**

distant bamboo. Tobacco, vegetables, large striped bags full of rice, pigs and chickens were all being taken down the track with the aid of horses and strong backs.

There was also a steady flow of jeeps, picking their way carefully through the rutted ground as if it was a minefield—monsoon rains and soft earth had combined to make furrows on the track more than a metre deep, which meant that taking a jeep down there was like driving along the top of two irregular walls. All the vehicles were draped with people, and a large part of their journey was spent negotiating the fractured surface at barely walking pace. The people hanging from the sides kept as still as possible, with one occasionally dismounting to check that all four wheels were still on the ground.

By the time I reached Bittuang and the end of my walk, the morning rush was over and the flow had started to reverse itself. I was starting to look forward to sitting on a bus and continuing to the heart of Torajaland. ☐

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