

# Sumatra by the back door

With its grass huts, lake tribes, wildlife reserves, steamy jungles, crater lakes and immense untouched forests, Sumatra is the third most popular tourist destination in Indonesia. It's still a place for adventure, as **Robby Payne and Paul Dick** discovered

**W**e are back in Indonesia, excited to be travelling again. Our destination is Sumatra, the fifth largest island in the world. Sumatra is 1760 kilometres long and up to 400 kilometres wide.

The best way of reaching the Sumatra mainland from Singapore is by ferry through the mystical Riau islands, so from Singapore's World Trade Centre we caught a ferry to the nearby Indonesian island of Batam.

From Batam we need a local ferry

to Pekanbaru. The sight of the ferry leaves me speechless and I wonder if, at 22, I am getting too old for this. Paul, my travelling companion, is also speechless. Can this huge barn tied up to the jetty really be our ferry?

A young English couple, Patrick and Emma, check their guide book and decide it's official, so we board.

Our English friends take a sleeper option inside—a board on which to rest. It is a temporary paradise considering the chaotic conditions. People are packing and repacking their

The town of Bukittinggi (above left) nestles in a lovely mountain valley; Lake Toba (above) is one of the world's deepest and highest lakes

gear in the narrow corridors below deck. This is odd, for the whole rooftop is available, and the weather is more than clement. Paul and I edge our way to the back door and go onto the roof.

However, the night is spent slipping in and out of consciousness because of the cold, caused by the heavy dew and the breeze on top of the boat. It is strange to think of being cold only a few kilometres off the equator.

There are random stops for naval or police checkpoints. Going downstairs to the toilet involves passing piles of pungent durian fruit, then a squeeze past the old men who have set up an unofficial gambling school, finally enjoying the relative sanctuary of the toilet.

During the night, Paul comments that there is no place in the world he would rather be. A few places spring to my mind, but I know what he means.

Arriving in Pekanbaru we have breakfast at a local *warung*, rejoice the



English couple and plan to take a local bus together. The four of us brace ourselves for eight hours of travel to the mountain market town of Bukittinggi.

Here's a tip for bus travellers: get the back seat or one close to it. Motion sickness is an all too familiar part of road travel in Indonesia. The man on the door hands out the official black plastic bags mechanically as the passengers signal to keep them coming. Almost as quickly, the black bags—complete with contents—are ejected through the open windows of the bus.

Surprisingly untouched by the 20th century, the scenery alongside the road is intensely beautiful. We arrive late in the afternoon, find a cheap room for the night, and arrange to meet the English couple the next day.

Bukittinggi is a favourite destination for travellers through Sumatra. Western-style cafes line the main street, where people sit and drink coffee, chatting about nothing in particular. It's a friendly place.

Also high on the go-see list is Lake Maninjau, set in a dormant volcano crater and known for its remoteness and great beauty. Yet it is only half an hour's ride by motorcycle from Bukittinggi. We hire two motorbikes. The scenery is breathtaking. I feel at one with nature as we ride down the road inside the crater.

My trusty Honda Dream could well be a Harley, and for a while I am Dennis Hopper in Easy Rider. When

the daydream ends, and the novelty of riding little more than a scooter wears off, there are facilities for water skiing, swimming and other activities.

From Bukittinggi we head north, again by minibus, to the western coastal town of Sibolga in North Sumatra. We convince Patrick and Emma to come along. On the 10-hour trip, the minibus becomes a nightclub on wheels as music blares out through a box speaker wedged between us.

The torrential rain comes on cue early in the afternoon and, as the others sleep, the window provides entertainment for me, like watching the Discovery Channel.

By the time we arrive in Sibolga, no-one feels like exploring. The first ferry for Nias seems the only option. Patrick and Emma question the wisdom of another ferry ride so soon after the last one; Paul and I spend 20 minutes arguing with the guy selling the tickets—there is a discrepancy of a couple of dollars between the advertised price and what he's asking.

The overnight ferry to Nias provides a sleeper cabin for only Rp.17,500. We arrive in Nias at first light.

Nias is the largest, best-known and one of the most accessible islands of Sumatra. One hundred kilometres long and only 50 wide, it is home to one of South-east Asia's most fascinating cultures, expressing itself today mainly in an ancient architectural style, stone sculptures and remarkable stone-jumping rituals.

In recent years Nias has played host to some of the world's most noted surfers. They particularly favour the

Lagundi Bay area. Here we stay at Sardi's, one of the friendlier of the huge bamboo bungalows that line the waterfront.

Sardi's, like many of the bungalows, charges little for the room, making up with charges—still modest—for the meals, which often consist of more fish than you can possibly eat. Delicious! They give you plenty of help in organising surfboards, motorbikes, transport to town and so on.

Exploring by motorbike with Paul

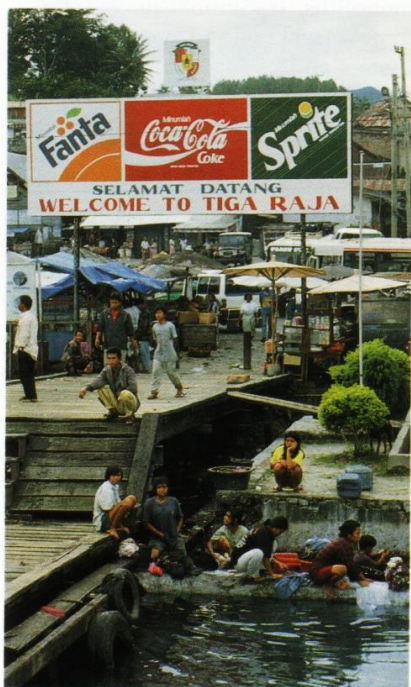


ROBBY PAINÉ



PAINÉ

Clockwise from above: one of the smaller local ferries; totem pole-style carvings in a village; boys canoeing; port beside Lake Toba

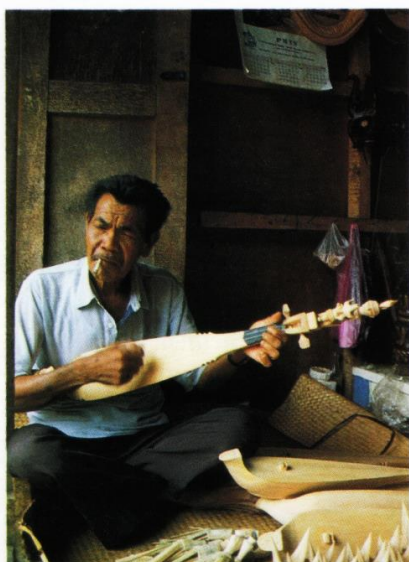


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PAINÉ





PAUL DICK



ROBBY PAYNE



PAYNE



PAYNE

**Planting rice near Bukittinggi and (left to right above) making music near Lake Toba, an artist at work, and snacks for sale**

riding pillion provides its own amusement. We crest a hill, come down the other side . . . and I realise Paul is no longer on the back. Either he has been jolted off or he has simply given up trying to hang on. Eat your heart out, America's Funniest Home Videos.

Leaving Nias you can return to the mainland either via ferry or on a domestic flight. After so many ferries, we opt for the relative luxury of an aircraft. We say goodbye to Patrick and Emma.

At the airport we meet two Australian guys in their late forties. One is a taxi driver from Sydney, the other is an old friend of his from Brisbane. They share with us the regulation '20 years ago mate' stories of Nias in the days before mass tourism. It's a pleasure to share someone's memories.

We jump into our little 20-seater aircraft and say our prayers. After an

hour or so, and to our relief, we arrive in Medan.

It is Sumatra's capital and an important port. The city is known among travellers for being noisy and crowded. It is a departure point for Malaysia as well as internal destinations such as Lake Toba and the Karo Highlands.

Upon arrival in Medan we find a taxi and are on our way to Lake Toba. It makes sense to share a taxi rather than risk the local bus ride, which can stretch the journey to six hours and perhaps as many black plastic bags.

After two or three hours, Lake Toba appears before us, as welcome as an oasis in the desert. One of the largest lakes in South-east Asia, Lake Toba is the result of a gigantic volcanic explosion, making it one of the deepest and highest lakes in the world.

Sitting in the middle of Lake Toba

is Samosir island. It's worth yet another ferry ride to see this island, known for its traditional houses and rich Batak culture.

We hire another Honda Dream and make a trip to Samosir's Hot Springs. Subconsciously, this may be a recognition of our need for a hot shower. Disappointingly, the springs are far too hot for swimming, and far too small.

We settle for a general look around the island, soaking up the culture. Samosir Island offers visitors stone monoliths, traditional houses, royal tombs, trekking and recreational activities, and a relaxed atmosphere. All this is managed easily in a day.

We stay overnight at a guesthouse, quietly talking about the trip which is now coming to an end. The next day we will return to Medan for the afternoon flight to Kuala Lumpur.

On the first ferry of the morning, people have mixed feelings about departing. An English couple have stayed longer than they planned but cannot explain why. Others are already talking about a return trip to Samosir. Looking around at the spectacular scenery through the early morning light, we understand how they feel.



*Robby Payne, who wrote the story, is an Australian photographer working in Asia; Paul Dick is an Australian photography student*