

A Fortnight in Indonesia

Sybel and I had a most interesting and varied tour of Java, the main island in what is now the fourth largest country in the world by population. The landscape is quite dramatic thanks to the row of volcanoes along the length of the island, some of which are very active – it is part of the Pacific ‘*rim of fire*’. At one point we had to do a detour to avoid a great lake which has been caused by water, mud and gas issuing from a volcano, disrupting a major highway. We went up two of them, the most memorable being Mount Bromo in the east. It had literally blown its top in ancient times, leaving a huge caldera within which a new volcano has gradually emerged. We were taken up to a viewpoint at the edge of the caldera (about 9,000 ft) to watch the sunrise, then descended to the so-called Sea of Sand inside, from where we climbed up unto the sulphurous fumes being emitted from the new crater. In the background we could see Mt. Semeru, Java’s highest mountain – also emitting puffs of smoke: an unforgettable sight.

Java also contains some of the most important historic shrines in south-east Asia, particularly Borobudur (Buddhist) and Prambanan (Hindu) – both dating from the 8th-9th centuries A.D. They are embellished with sculpture – in the case of Borobudur, illustrating the life and teachings of Buddha. One scene shows him in the form of a great turtle rescuing some shipwrecked sailors and bringing them to an island – then, seeing that they had nothing to eat there, offering himself as food: a Christ-like resonance. Pilgrims walk along the passages carved into the outside of the monument, gradually ascending to the level of enlightenment at the top.

Our guide - whose main job was organising football matches in the East Asian Champions’ League with Japan, Korea, etc., - was obviously full of reverence for the site, so I asked him if he was a Buddhist – no, he said, he was a Muslim. This was an interesting pointer to the generally tolerant, indeed syncretistic, character of Islam in Indonesia. Islam spread to these islands relatively late – in the 14th-16th centuries; conveyed by merchants from around the west of the Indian Ocean, and making converts mainly through

peaceful means. So elements of the previous Buddhist and Hindu cultures lingered on. Apart from the temples, we had another experience of this through a performance of the Hindu dance-drama ‘*Ramayana*’ – brilliantly done in the mansion of a courtier of the (Muslim) Sultan of Yogyakarta. Indonesia in fact has the largest Muslim population of any country in the world, but there are substantial minority communities – Hindu, Buddhist, Christian – who in general seem to be treated fairly enough. But the tolerant tradition is under pressure from Saudi Arabian influences: when we asked about the prospects, the answer was that the current democracy is a safeguard, as most people do not want to become a Saudi outpost. A lot of women wear headscarves and ‘*modest*’ dress, but not veils. The recent Presidential election result (ignored as far as I could see by our dumbed-down media which seems only interested in crises) bears this out – the moderate and sensible S B Yudhoyono was re-elected.

We visited the elegant little Anglican Church in Jakarta, built when the British seized Java from the Dutch towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars. And we visited markets, villages, (including a school where 6-year-olds sang the national anthem for us), the Botanic Gardens at Bogor outside Jakarta where we saw cinnamon, nutmeg and other tropical trees, and two princely palaces. But not least, there was the traffic: Java’s hazards are popularly thought to be volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and the occasional terrorist outrage, but for us they seemed to be primarily the barrage of scooters, cars and trucks in the cities and along the main roads. Jakarta and particularly Surabaya (the second city, where we finished our tour) badly need a decent public transport system. The style of driving seemed highly risky but also, one must admit, skilful: we did not see a single accident; and the roads themselves are relatively good. And it has to be a sign of a thriving economy – in fact Indonesia seems to have weathered the current recession pretty well. But we were happy to make our two longest journeys by train – in comfortable 1st class air-conditioned coaches

(cheap for us), and giving good views of the very productive countryside.

We spent our first day in Jakarta, the capital – a sprawling city with a high-rise business district at its centre. Our tour was organised by the UK Historical Association, and our very first visit was to the Commonwealth War Cemetery in the suburbs, well maintained as always, where the leader of our group laid a wreath on the grave of a relative who had died in September 1945 when his plane had crashed while trying to drop supplies to the wretched inmates of a prisoner-of-war camp. There were also graves of men who had been killed early in 1942 trying to defend the Netherlands East Indies against the Japanese onslaught – Indonesia was the major part of the Dutch colonial empire. And there were others dating from 1945-46, of men from the British-Indian armies which had gone in shortly after the Japanese surrender under Lord Mountbatten's command, to rescue the PoWs and round up the Japanese. I was particularly interested in these, as some years ago I had done research on Mountbatten's role in south-east Asia, and in fact I gave two talks on that during our trip. Mountbatten's main concern was to persuade the Dutch that times had changed radically since pre-war days and that they needed to come to terms with the independent Republic of Indonesia which had been proclaimed immediately after the Japanese collapse. Unfortunately the Dutch were reluctant to face realities, and the British spent a very uncomfortable year as would-be mediators between the two sides. I gave my second talk in Surabaya – the city in which bitter and destructive but essentially unwanted and accidental fighting raged for 3 weeks in November 1945 between the British/Indian forces and Indonesian irregulars. But at least we avoided going to war with the Indonesian Government on behalf of the Dutch, which is what they had hoped for.

So our fortnight's tour had given us plenty to think about. A few final points – one of the guide-books promises '*You will eat well in Indonesia*' – and we did. The climate generally was rather hot and humid. And the people generally were extremely courteous and friendly.

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