

A SURPRISE ON EVERY SHORE FOR ATF DELEGATES

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When the nearly 2000 delegates to the Asean Tourism Forum (ATF) touch down in Indonesia this January, they will be setting foot on one of the most fascinating countries on earth.



Author in Bali

The conference, scheduled for January 9-15 in Manado on the island of Sulawesi, is held annually

in alphabetical order in the 10 nations that comprise the ATF--- Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia,

Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

I have been attending these conferences for many years as a media delegate and never cease to be amazed at the amount of tourism it produces for this part of the world. I fully expect to be

amazed once again in January as Indonesia is loaded with surprises, a crown jewel in the travel and tourism industry.

Northern Sulawesi is mesmerizing in itself, complete with underwater volcanoes, funerals that can last for a year, burial sites that reach for the skies and people who live in boats on dry land.

Boat houses



The underwater volcanoes are not too far from the ATF center of Manado. The sky-high burial sites are further south in an area known as Tana Toraja, a hill country first inhabited by boat people from China several centuries ago. Consequently, some homes are built in the shape of boats, suspended a few feet above ground by tree trunks.

But the bizarre and ritualistic funeral feasts, which last a week or more and

Sulawesi morning market



take place as long as a year after death, are Sulawesi's major attraction.

Bodies are embalmed, wrapped like mummies and remain in the home during the long waiting period. During this time, relatives and friends pretend the deceased is merely ill, even bringing plates of food to the body regularly.

Months pass as relatives throughout vast Indonesia save

enough money to make the journey to Sulawesi. When all are there, the feast begins with a sacrificial beheading of from 5 to 20 water buffaloes. The feast takes place during the next few days, including the consumption of the buffalo meat.

The bodies are then taken to a nearby mountain and buried in cliffside tombs, with the noblest

class highest on the mountain. Wooden statues of gods are placed in front of some tombs to protect the deceased from evil.

This is but one of thousands of mysteries and surprises throughout Indonesia, the vast island nation that stretches more than 5000 kilometers across the equator. In all, there are more than 17,500 islands that dangle like a necklace from southern Thailand to New Guinea. Only about 6000 islands are inhabited and many have no names.

Some 230 million speak almost

600 different languages and cultures vary dramatically from island to island. There is a surprise on every shore

The aim of ATF is to promote tourism and economic growth in all of the 10 member countries. This January will mark the 3rd annual conference. Those attending will come away with plenty of selling points, courtesy of Indonesia.

(Dominick A. Merle is Canadian Director of the International Travel Writers Assn. and is based in Montreal).

Toraja cliff graves

