A SURPRISE ON EVERY SHORE FOR ATF DELEGATES

By: DOMINICK A. MERLE MANADO, INDONESIA

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.



The conference, scheduled for January 915- in Manado on the island of Sulawesi, is held annually

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

Malaysia. Laos. and Vietnam.

I have been attending these tourism industry. conferences for many years as a media delegate and never cease in itself, complete with underwater to be amazed at the amount of volcanoes, funerals that can last tourism it produces for this part of for a year, burial sites that reach the world. I fully expect to be for the skies and people who live

Myanmar, amazed once again in January as Philippines, Singapore, Thailand Indonesia is loaded with surprises, a crown jewel in the travel and

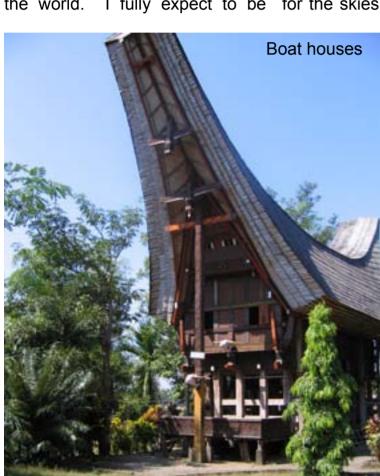
Northern Sulawesi is mesmerizing

in boats on dry land.

The underwater volcanoes are not too far from the ATF center of Manado. The sky-high burial sites are further south in an area Tana known as 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 mornina 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.

relatives Months pass as 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 3st annual conference. Those attending will come away with plenty of selling points, courtesy of Indonesia.

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