

A Tenderfoot Safari In Indonesia TRACKING THE WILD TARSIERS

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

**MANADO, INDONESIA---Off we go again on another Indonesian
adventure!**



Anton Handojo
at Manado
market

On my last visit, I stayed safely downwind while a flesh-eating, 300-pound Komodo Dragon was ferociously sniffing for "dinner"---

making me merely an appetizer since this monster can easily consume 80 percent of his body weight in one meal!

Today I am striding boldly into the North Sulawesi jungle to track another rare creature found only in Indonesia, an elusive freak of nature known as the tarsier.

But this time I have checked my fear at the jungle door, for the tarsier is the world's tiniest monkey, not much larger than your index finger and weighing less than a stick of butter.

Yet, it is a freaky looking creature, with enormous eyes that glow in the dark and a head that can swivel from side to side and up and down

almost in a complete circle, sort of like a cross between E.T. and the possessed girl in The Exorcist.

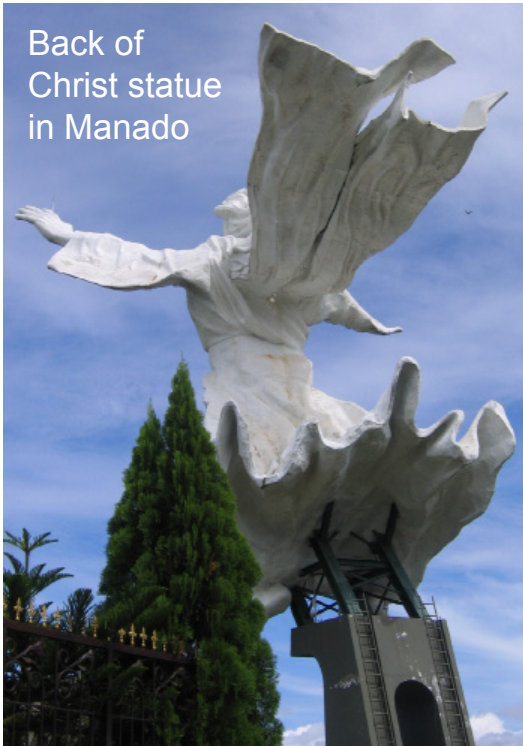
The revolving head is perhaps a defense mechanism to avoid being stepped on, because the tarsiers are extremely shy and their bug eyes remain in a perpetual terrified stare. They are literally afraid of their own shadows, if in fact they even cast them.

They are also extremely difficult to track, as my guide Anton and me would soon discover.



Author Dominick
Merle with Durian fruit

Back of
Christ statue
in Manado



Typical jungle
flower



We began our trip in the medium sized city of Manado on Sulawesi island, the northernmost point in all of Indonesia, in fact much closer to the Philippines than most other cities within the sprawling Indonesian island chain. The nearby islands, particularly Bunaken Island, are household names for divers, snorkelers and fishers.

We are here to attend the annual Asean Tourism Forum, a cooperative regional effort to promote tourism in its 10-member nations---Brunei, Cambodia,

Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The event moves annually to each member nation in alphabetical order.

Getting here from North America is not easy, at least 24 hours in air and 36 hours including stops. But our carrier, Qatar Airways (www.qatarairways.com), made it an enjoyable trip from Montreal to Jakarta with a stopover in Doha. Billed as the world's five-star airline, it lived up to its reputation.

We checked into the Hotel Aryaduta in Manado, and it was

nically situated in the heart of the city, a short walk right to the ocean and left to shops and restaurants. Rooms were spacious, simple but elegant and the breakfast buffets were bountiful. The Aryaduta is Indonesia's largest hotel chain with eight properties and several others in the planning stage (www.aryaduta.com).

But we are in quest of the tarsier and have spent the better part of the day in several jungle areas thus far, but with no results. Now we are in a preserved area known

as Tangkoko.

"We may find here," Anton said.

"But where do we look...on the ground, in trees?" I asked.

"They hop like kangaroo," he said, "jump in front of you."

That part was true. Tarsiers can leap six feet at a time on the ground, from tree to tree and have been known to snare tiny birds in flight.

But we still didn't see any and darkness was setting in. Anton arranged for two motorbike riders to carry us further into the jungle

Ban Hing Kiong temple



Boy on
lunch
break



Pretty dancer



where there had been recent sightings. After zig-zagging our own paths for about 20 minutes the jungle became too thick to continue our ride.

The motorbike drivers said we would have to walk the rest of the way, about 600 meters, but there would only be a ten percent chance of spotting a tarsier as darkness was quickly setting in.

There was a much better chance, they said, of spotting a giant anaconda snake (or it spotting us) as the anacondas are very active

and very hungry at night.

We had no choice but to call off the hunt.

However, the next morning we saw hundreds of tarsiers---not in the flesh but tacky reproductions in souvenir shops. Anton bought me one as a memento.

Anton's full name is Dr. Anton Handojo and he is owner of a tour and travel agency called Excellent Holidays (www.excellentholidays.info). He has been in the business for 30 years and often accompanies clients on Indonesian tours.

But in between our searches for the tarsiers, we did squeeze in a mini-adventure during a traditional Indonesian lunch in a tiny jungle village. There were no menus or orders given. A mound of steamed rice promptly came followed by 10 side dishes.

I sampled them all and learned towards the end of the feast that the sides included dog, snake, pig's ears, various innards and wings that looked too small for a chicken.

Manado, a city of about 500,000 residents, is known for something

else besides its nearby diving and snorkeling paradises. It gets the shakes regularly because of a number of nearby volcanoes, some in the deep waters of the South Pacific at the city's doorstep.

On my last night, I felt the earth move about 5 a.m. in my 7th floor hotel room. The front desk confirmed the volcanic activity and said it happens at least once a month.

Now, we are headed south on sprawling Sulawesi island in search of our next adventure.





Men's country band

Sulawesi is shaped somewhat like an orchid, and it will be a five-day winding drive from the northeastern tip of Manado to Makassar at the southwest entrance to the island.

The three of us---Anton, myself and Freddie the driver---passed through rugged mountains and seacoasts in central Sulawesi, overnighiting at modest hotels. Then through massive rice-growing plains in west Sulawesi, and tiny villages where large wooden schooners were built.

It was a scenic but bumpy ride,

and finally we entered South Sulawesi where a strange adventure was waiting in an area known as Tana Toraja. Our driver stopped suddenly and said something to Anton.

"There is something here you should see," Anton said. We left the vehicle, walked a short distance into the woods, turned right at a bamboo hut and saw 10 decapitated water buffalo heads in a semi-circle in the middle of a tiny bamboo village. We had just entered a strange funeral feast.

But the deceased had passed

on several months ago. Since then, the man, in this case, had been embalmed, wrapped like a mummy and placed in a corner of a hut. Relatives and friends pretended he was merely ill, even bringing plates of food to the body three times a day.

We were allowed to enter the hut and met the surviving son and daughter. We also saw the wrapped body with plates of food nearby. It was both a sad and strange experience.

The long wait between death

and burial---sometimes as long as a year after death--- is to allow other relatives and friends from throughout vast Indonesia to save enough money to make their way to Tana Toraja.

We had arrived shortly after the beheadings of the buffaloes, signalling that all relatives were now here and the funeral feast would begin. Relatives were no longer pretending the deceased was ill.

The feast itself lasts a few days, including the consumption of the

Young girlfriends



Tarsier in
souvenir shop



buffalo meat. The bodies are then taken to a nearby mountain and buried in cliff-side tombs, with the noblest class on top.

We visited one of these cliff-side tombs in an area known as Londa. Wooden statues of gods were in front of many tombs to protect the deceased from any evil influences.

Finally we arrived at the bustling port city of Makassar and the end of our visit to this mysterious island.

At Makassar airport, I met a Filipino who claimed that the tiniest monkeys were actually in The

Philippines. But Indonesians nearby vehemently disagreed, so I'm sticking to my story.

We flew from Makassar to Jakarta, then drove to Anton's home city of Bandung, which is well known in Asia as a shopping and culinary center. I spent my final two nights there, one at a modern downtown hotel, the Grand Hotel Preanger (www.aerowisatahotels.com), which features fine dining and modern rooms at nice rates.

My final night was at the Cipaku (www.cipakuindah.com), a restful garden-type hotel on a hill

overlooking the city. It was a tranquil and peaceful ending to yet another exciting trip to Indonesia.

We ended with dinner at a charming hilltop restaurant called Cafe Sierra in the north end of the city. It was a warm evening and we sat outside on the balcony with a magnificent view of Bandung. The restaurant specializes in

Western cuisine, with steaks its specialty. And they were tasty.

Nothing as exotic as our 10-dish lunch back in the Sulawesi jungle. But no surprises, either.

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



Young boy on throne at cultural show

IF YOU GO

Figure 24 hours flying time and 36 hours travelling time from North America. We flew Qatar Airways (www.qatarairways.com) from Montreal to Jakarta via Doha, continuing on Garuda Airlines to Sulawesi.

Visas can be obtained upon entry at Jakarta for \$25

The climate is largely tropical with temperatures from 20 to 30 C (70-90 F).

For further information on Sulawesi and Indonesia, try www.indonesia.travel