

INDONESIA: THE SURPRISE OF ASIA

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

(Warning: This article contains graphic descriptions that may disturb some readers)



SULAWESI, Indonesia---Shortly after dawn our snorkeling adventure in the Sulawesi Sea came to an abrupt end when a tsunami alert was sounded from the nearby Philippines. We speed-swam to shore, shed our goggles and fins on the beach, and headed for the nearest hills.

The jungle hills, that is. But by dusk we were heading back down just as fast when someone spotted a boa constrictor slithering our way in the nearby brush.

Caught between a tsunami and a boa---this definitely wasn't Kansas. Welcome to the exotic and sometimes "too exciting" island chain of Indonesia.

Fortunately, the tsunami never materialized, nor did the boa turn one of us into a sandwich. But this day turned out to be the highlight

of a week-long tour, which proves once again that what's not on the agenda is often more memorable than what is.

We arrived in the medium-sized city of Manado at the northernmost point of the vast Indonesian island chain, and were greeted by our guide, Lexi, a look-alike for the late actor Yul Brynner. In fact, like Brynner, Lexi was of Mongolian heritage.

"Sleep good tonight," Lexi said, "big day tomorrow. We go for





snorkeling and diving at Bunaken Island.”

Little did he know that we would never make Bunaken Island (a household name for divers), our snorkeling would be cut short and he would lead us on a series of unscripted adventures, ending with the brush with the boa.

There were five of us on the group tour and after abandoning the beach, Lexi hired a van and driver to take us a safe 800 meters above sea level into the jungle hills.

“Very few tourists come here,” Lexi said. “I will take you to typical jungle market.”

We took a dirt side road from the single-lane “highway” and drove 20 minutes into the jungle to a village called Tomahan. Basically, the village was the market, the main food supply for people living in the scattered jungle communities.

The market entrance seemed typical---fruits, vegetables, herbs---but suddenly morphed into a typical scene from a horror movie.

Butchers were chopping up cats, rats, bats, dogs, snakes, the occasional chicken or goat and some creatures I truly did not recognize.

Dogs and cats are pretty much of a staple in this part of the world, the rats were white-tailed jungle creatures a foot long, the bats were fruit bats that are mostly barbecued on skewers and I didn't bother to ask about some of the other recipes.

But I did ask Lexi if there were any culinary taboos. "We don't eat owl," he said. I asked why. "Many believe the big eyes would haunt you," he explained, "and some say they just don't taste good."

After our market shocker, we stopped for lunch at a small restaurant called Danau overlooking Lake Tonado. It was a typical set lunch called "rijsttafel," a mound of rice surrounded by a number of side dishes.





We were hungry, the meal was delicious and although we agreed on a “don’t ask-don’t tell” policy, nothing on the table tasted “just like chicken” and the wings in one dish were definitely much too small for chicken.

“Now we will search for the world’s smallest monkey,” Lexi said as he continued with his improvised itinerary.

We drove to a jungle area called Tangkoko, said to be one of the few places in the world where the

tarsier monkeys can be found in the wild. The creatures are no more than six inches high, have enormous round eyes that glow in the dark and heads that can swivel almost completely around.

We walked along a jungle path to an area where the creatures are generally seen, but with no sightings. Lexi said the breed is gradually disappearing, with perhaps only several hundred tarsiers still living in the jungle.

“Other big animals attack them,”

Lexi said. And yes, they often end up on satay sticks in native villages, he added.

Lexi suggested we wait in the jungle until dusk, when the tarsiers often come down from the trees to feed on the jungle floor.

But shortly after a guide came sprinting our way out of the jungle shouting something. Lexi gave a brief translation, “Big boa!” and our evening safari ended just as abruptly as our dawn snorkeling.

We finally visited Bunaken Island a couple of days later, and took a city tour in Manado that included the civilized city market, but the talk at the “rijsttafels” the rest of the week was our wild day in the jungle.

TOUR 2: JAKARTA-BANDUNG

Our final three days were spent in the Jakarta-Bandung area on the island of Java. We were greeted by our guide, Anton, who operates a tour agency appropriately named







Excellent Holidays
(excellentholidays.info or email
anton@excellentholidays.info.)

“We will have city tour, scenic tour, culinary tour and shopping tour,” Anton proudly announced.

Our Jakarta city tour consisted mainly of museums and modern shopping complexes. Jakarta is a teeming metropolis of about 12-million residents and as many motorbikes. It is primarily a business center with most tourists merely overnighting before

heading off to Bali or Borneo or a number of other exotic islands

On our way out of Jakarta the next morning to begin our five-hour scenic drive to Bandung, we saw people crowded atop the elevated trains, holding on for dear life, on their way to work.

Anton said this only happened during rush hours.

Our first stop was the medium-sized (2 million) city of Bogor, a favorite weekend retreat for Jakarta residents seeking peace,

quiet and fresh air. Located some 300 feet above sea level, the area surrounding Bogar is filled with tea plantations stretching high into the mountains. This was the scenic part of our tour.

The culinary tour Anton promised consisted of five or six stops along the way to sample local food---satays, soups, vegetables, fruits---from roadside stands or village shops. I recall ears of corn as large as a French baguette (one ear serves two) and crocodile fruit

where you eat the inside for good digestion, boil the prickly outside and drink the juice to cure diabetes, or so they say.

In Bandung, known as Indonesia's shopping capital, we checked into the Horison Hotel (horisonbandung.com) for our final two nights, in the heart of the city of about 3-million residents. Nicely furnished, the hotel had 3 large swimming pools, a tennis court and was within walking distance of many of Bandung's shopping outlets.





There are about 50 shopping outlets in Bandung, many of them 6 to 10 stories. Some city blocks are wall-to-wall outlets. One tacky section has huge figures of comic book heroes (Superman, Spiderman) jutting out from the buildings overlooking the street.

It's all here, high quality, medium and knock-offs. Bandung, like all of Indonesia, has a little something for everybody.

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

IF YOU GO

I flew Air Canada (aircanada.com) from Toronto to Hong Kong, continuing to Jakarta on China Airlines. It proved to be a lucky choice. An Air Canada ticket agent noticed on my passport that I would be airborne on my birthday and I was bumped up to first class as a present. I was told it was a double event as the airline is currently celebrating its 75th birthday.

Visas can be obtained on entry in Jakarta for \$25.

Temperatures are largely tropical year round ranging from 20 to 35



C (70 to 100 F).

For further info on Sulawesi, indonesia.travel.

Jakarta and Bandung, try www.

