



My Sumatra Trip

Two week journey - 2015

Getting there

I'm Sumatra bound, a first for me. The journey starts with a Tuktuk from my apartment at 6.30am. The first plane takes me two hours south east to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia where I make the silly mistake of trying to pay for lunch with Indonesian rupiah, oops wrong country.

Another first is that I appear to be the only non-Asian on the flight. Gazing around me in the G3 departure lounge I feel a little unique but at the same time a little nervous as my eyes confirm that, apparently, there are no others of my kind here. I actually feel a little bit silly about just how pleased I feel on standing up at the flight boarding announcement and seeing two young, white backpackers. I don't talk to them but it's somehow reassuring to know they're there.

The plane has hardly reached altitude and its descending again. A 60 minute flight and with the time difference between Malaysia and Sumatra we actually arrive, spot-on the time we left!

It's very quick and easy to get the visa on arrival; pay the man \$35 (although the receipt you'll receive is only for \$25) under the big sign "Visa on Arrival" to your right as you enter the immigration area. No need for photos, just hand over your

passport and money. You then take the nice mauve visa to the gate for "Visa on Arrival" and he pastes the small half page visa into your passport.

Head towards the big signs saying railway links, whilst trying to ward off the men trying to sell you a ride in their taxi . These guys are pretty determined! Once through the main doors the buses are to the right. Just show the guys the name of the bus station you would like to head to. This time I was definitely the only westerner but locals getting on smile & say hallo.

About an hour later, across town in heavy traffic the guy yells out to me it's my stop, of course I didn't understand what he said but I got the idea. The trip had cost me \$1.40 and I've been given the impression that Medan is not the most picturesque of places.

A young local girl points me in the right direction for the bus station where I'll catch my bus to Berestagi. Somehow people on the street seem to know where I want to head, it must be my backpack and white skin that gives them the idea that it's for a tourist place I'm bound. Only a 5 min walk and I'm directed into a small shop frontage. Someone offers me a chair and two minutes later an extremely brightly coloured and very decorated bus pulls up and the gestures from all imply that I should hop on. I wedge myself next to someone on very narrow seats and as more and more people clamber on my backpack is taken from me and joins the other parcels on the roof.

It's really hot and thankfully all the windows are slid open, the much needed breeze rushing in as we trundle along. It takes us about an hour to get out of the town and by this time more people have clambered on, to perch on armrests, push their bums into a narrow gap on the back seat or scale up onto the roof.

We begin to climb, the view is green and lush and and this is also when the rain starts. No more nice breeze and now it feels like the temperate has dropped by about 10 degrees.

About an hour and 45 mins later we must be getting close to my destination as the ticket guy has climbed off the roof and implied I need to pay. It's pretty amusing as I try to understand how much he wants, finally the boy sitting next to me takes a few notes from the bundle in my hand and the money weaves it's way through the bodies to reach his hand. It's amounted to \$1 for the two hour trip! He confirms we're all



The beautifully decorative mode of transport

good with "ok, ok Mr" a few of the better English speakers in the mix put him right on his gender error.

About fifteen minutes later the bus stops and I clamber over bodies to get out. My backpack comes out from the tarp it's been placed under, in the most part nicely dry.

I've not booked any accommodation and I wander around a bit until I get over it and go into the first place with the words hotel on their sign. The guy starts at 200 rupiah but I say 100 rupiah (\$7.70) and we settle on that. I'm staying at the Mexico Fried Chicken Hotel but for less than \$8 a night I can't really expect the Fried Caviar Hotel. There's hot water which at the now cool temperatures is a god send and I'm almost 90% rinsed off when the power goes off. I manage to grope around in the dark for my towel and then my phone so I can use the torch app. Luckily I'm almost dressed when I hear the hotel manager saying my name outside my door. We'd been chatting earlier as I signed in, he'd brought me a battery operated lantern, I think I'm their only customer.



He comes and joins me at my table in the restaurant that has only candles for light later on. They have to take my lantern to the kitchen so they can see to cook my meal. He seems to be a friendly, honest guy and within 10 mins I've agreed to rent a motorbike on which he'll drive me to the Sibayak Volcano, the hot springs and the Karo local people's traditional home, the next day. This could be either a fantastic experience or a big mistake.

Different architecture as well as a vast array of religious structures and the beautiful lush greenness are Berestagi and its outlying areas. I pay the 5000 rupiah to head up the volcano and we immediately start climbing up a cement road that has

broken up into massive holes and is strewn with rocks. I offer up thanks to my guardian angel that someone other than me is driving this motorbike. Mr S we'll call him as I can't remember his Indonesian name, tells me that 20 years ago, the last time he was here, this road didn't exist, it was steps all the way to the top. A 3 hour trek in his day is only a 30min one now.

He has to let me off the bike as we get closer to the top as it's very steep and this 110cc bike doesn't have the power to take both our weight. I enjoy the walk although the altitude has my lungs working overtime, there are so many people descending and they are all friendly, "hallo Mr", " where you from Mr?", "what's your name?" The braver ones ask for a photography with me and want to shake my hand afterwards. Some of the girls even press the back of my hand against their face.

We reach the bike parking area which is also a camping ground, there's tents everywhere and unfortunately mounds of discarded water bottles and rubbish. The trek up was pretty hard in the most part because of a wet muddy track and me not wearing the right shoes. But it was great to pop out onto the

wide open vista of a bare volcanic rock valley with geysers blowing out sulphuric gas. Once again there's tents and camping sites all over the rock faces. Apparently young adults come up from Medan for a weekend on the volcano. Interestingly, so many of the Indonesian boys are carrying guitars and already I've noticed they love to sing.

You can climb to the very top of the volcano and place your flag. From where we stood, the furthest I was game to go, you could see this tiny speck of a body at the top whooping with excitement while waving their flag.



A lot of the vegetation around the volcano reminded me of home, ferns and "punga's" but that's where the similarity ends because where you'd hardly hear or see anything else other than nature in New Zealand, here I really am shocked by the sheer amount of people. That's probably why Mr S laughs so heartily when I tell him the population of my country.

We take a different decent down the mountain, which is so beautifully overgrown with nature and the sun is shining, aarrhh, a little piece of heaven right here! A prime growing area, there's beautiful little farming inlets growing spring onions, chillies, pumpkins and what looks like cabbages and lettuces.



The hot springs is about 6 pools each at a different temperature of hot. It was like getting into a very steaming hot bath and I was quite excited to see a big black cloud coming over as it would've be nice to feel the rain coming down while toasty warm. Unfortunately the rain held off until later when we were already heading off on the bike.

Mr S. took me all over the district, we were hours on the bike passing through beautiful



countryside, past orange orchards and small towns. He took me to a massive golden Buddhist temple only a few years old. Once again there were so many people here. We all had to sign in and have our bags checked for explosives, I presume. On taking your shoes off you were allowed to enter the temple but amazingly enough very few people were. A very highly Muslim country, it would appear they can come and check out the structure of a different religion but not enter it.

Next was a trip to the Karo people's native home. An amazingly wooden structure built entirely without nails. An 85 year old lady came out and welcomed us inside. An amazing thing to experience. Eight families live in this structure, each separated by curtains, which at this time of the day are hooked

up out of the way. Each family has their own cooking area inside the structure and any smoke is drawn up by the very highness of the roof. It's hard to believe that this is not a show-home, but is actually their home and even harder to believe, is that there is not one nail.



It starts to pour while we're here so we wait for it to abate and watch two young girls amuse themselves with a game of moving Popsicle sticks by slapping their hands onto the floor in front of them.

We leave too soon and as we head out of the village and up another hill we get pelted on and need to take shelter under a roadside shack where a group of other motorcyclist's have stopped. It appears it's a palm wine shack full of men and I am very definitely the centre of attention being

the only female and western. I'm offered a packet of biscuits that taste like biscuits from home and of course the palm wine. I try it to be polite and amazingly it's not too awful.

By this time I'm wet, frozen and hungry and when the rain begins to let up I suggest to Mr S that we start to head back to Berestagi. We stop at a road side stall for oranges on the way and also for a very late lunch of a local bbq pork dish, Babi Panggang. I can't stop shivering even after eating the nice hot soup, rice and pork. It's another half an hour back to Berestagi and as I shiver on the bike all I can think of as my arse and hips are aching, is a hot, hot shower which luckily it is.

I use all of it up trying to thaw out and then put on every article of clothing, that's not already wet and climb into bed with every blanket in the room on top of me.

Berestagi To Lake Toba

While on the volcano yesterday Mr S. had spotted his cousin with two westerners being their guide. I got chatting to the guy and girl both from Northern Ireland and ended up bumping into them at the hot springs. We arranged that I would travel with them and Mr S's cousin to Lake Toba.

First up though, I went to the bank to try and change some Indonesian notes that people were rejecting because they were dated 1999. Unfortunately the bank rejected them too, saying I would need to take them to the Bank of Indonesian back in Medan to get them changed, bum!

Mr S's cousin, Mai, Jude and Robbie picked me up at 10.30am and it was fun to be able to travel and chat with people with the same language. We stopped, for me again, at the traditional home then for some sticky rice, Indonesia style ie with pepper added. We also visited the massive waterfall from which we could see Lake Toba, a massive

lake the same size as Singapore! But still an hour and a half travel away for us . . . and then the Kings (not current) residence where he housed his 12 wives.



Silospil Waterfall between Berestagi & Lake Toba

The scenery was, again beautiful the driving crazy and the people all lovely.

We arrived in Parapet, the jumping off point for the lake where Jude and Robbie already had accommodation booked. Way too expensive for me so Mai took me to find something else. Everything appears to be expensive, the one place that was only \$11 a night was really bad. No maintenance seemed to have been done on the place for 30 years, there were stains everywhere and I imagined if I did stay the night it'd be just me, the manager and the ghosts.

The plan had been to go out with my new Irish friends but I quickly made the call that no fun nite with them could be worth staying in that hotel.

Instead I got dropped off at the ferry stop and headed straight onto the lake. Mai had already booked me into accommodation and the the fabulous thing is that the ferry drops everyone off directly at the door. Although dark when we approached, the island looks like it's going to be a beautiful place and the accommodation turned out to be a much nicer choice than Parapet or Berestagi. I've actually ended up in a traditional Batik-traditional house, massive enough to hold a party and the best bit is I have to climb a ladder up to my bed (hopefully I don't need the loo during the night) and there's a wooden shutter I'll be able to throw open in the morning, lay in bed and gaze out on the lake.

Mas Cottages, Tuk Tuk, Samsoir Island,
Lake Toba

An outside bathroom which housed a squat toilet was the only less-than-perfect aspect of my traditional house. The mattress on the floor was so comfy when I curled up under the warm blanket and any gaps between the wooden planked walls made for fresh air, a definite plus after too much stifled heat and air conditioning like I'm used to. I woke early, threw open the shutters for my

view of the lake and watched the ferry come in and pick up some vacating guests.

There was a lot of cloud cover down low on the hills around the lake but I hired a mountain bike and headed off on a trip of discovery. I loved being on a bike again especially because there were nice steep bits to get my legs working! I stopped for water and got chatting to an Italian couple. The normal travellers thing of asking questions and trading advice.



View from my bed, first morning on Lake Toba

Day of Motorbikes, Local Markets and Greenery

I found the accommodation of my Belfast friends, took a dip in their swimming pool and ate very sweet pizza with them. Cycled home the long way to get another fix of the hills and spent most of my evening doing some research for the rest of my trip

I managed to sleep through my alarm but Robbie turned up anyway and we went and hired a motorbike for me and headed off to see what we could see of the island. This island reminds me so much of home. The vegetation

covering the hills grows right down and attempts to grow over the road. There's paddocks of greenness dotted with water buffalo, herons perched on their backs and Batik shrines. And always in the distance, this huge lake makes an occasionally appearance between the hills. We stop at a local market which is full of colour, bustle and noise and then head across to the mainland and up for a toilet stop at the hot springs. We meet an Australian couple on motorbikes too and they join us for our trip up the hill to check out the view. Once again it's nothing but beautiful scenery.



Sound asleep

On returning back onto the island we appear to have hit peak hour traffic and school is out. The kids are all dressed up and looking sharp in their school uniforms, white shirts and burgundy skirts or shorts and hats. I also noticed a mobile laptop truck as I go flying past. The flaps on the sides of the truck are raised up and laptops were positioned on benches inside. Kids have gathered around and are hopefully learning something, not playing games.

I returned the motorbike about 6 o'clock after lunch and a Cornetto which meant I was walking home in the dark. There's always the instinct that trouble could come your way but this laid-back island definitely has a safe feel. I was about 10 mins from home when a motorbike slowed down behind me and Brown asked me if I wanted a ride. He plays guitar and sings most nights at Mas Cottages.

Later on a storm rolls in and Brown accompanied by three other singers and a bongo drummer move inside the

communal area. It's amazing to hear the Batik songs, sweet sounds and nice tempos aided by Palm wine and a little weed.

My new friends are heading off to Bukit Lawang today but I decide to have a sleep in and stick around. It's just so chilled here, I do some hand washing, lay in the sun on a sun-lounger beside the lake, and chat to other travellers. The positive of this place is that the wifi is only in the communal area which means everyone needs to leave



their rooms. Meaning you get a chance to have some interaction even if the majority of the time everyone is on some kind of device.