



It had only been four days I'd spent at Mas Cottages but I'd met some wonderful people, couple that with the very chilled-outness and beautiful scenery of the place, it was very, very hard to leave.

Robbie, from Florida and Natarlia from Poland are a lovely young couple recently living in Malaysia, now working while they holiday. We shared many great discussions on life,

My Sumatra Trip, part two

The second week, Bukit Lawang and Banda Aceh

Leaving Lake Toba and the most frustrating road trip

countries, politics and what life choices one shouldn't make.

There was Mike, a retired Australian on his third visit to Sumatra. Meaning to finally do Bukit Lawang he's put it off again to stay on the lake, he like me doesn't want to leave.

Bruce, another Australian hasn't left. He's been living here for a year now, in his room on the lake. He works with stocks so has the luxury of working from wherever he locates himself.

Another guest, like me is leaving the next day, he's a Dutch guy. Already having done Bukit Lawang he's off to another island in Indonesia. It's his sons birthday and on singing happy birthday to him on the phone, one of the local staff join in! Yep, these people love to sing and sing well!

And so at 8am I make my way down from breakfast to get on the ferry, people have gotten out of bed to say goodbye and there's hugs all round. It's really moving to sit on the boat as it pulls away and have people waving from the restaurant and others from their balconies.

It takes about an hour to make pickups of other patrons around the island and head to the mainland. I've been put in a car with a nice couple from England and while we wait to leave I try on some trousers across the road at the local market. Trying on involves pulling them up over my other trousers and although the lovely lady has many options for me, I'm about 4 kilos too big for any of them.

I point out the bulging tyre on our car to one of the numerous men milling around it, he tells me "no problem". Ok then, off we go! What followed had to be one of the most frustrating car rides I've probably ever been on. I guess in trying to put a positive spin on it, we sure weren't going to be caught for speeding. He would involuntarily slow down from about 60 to 30kms for some reason only apparent to himself. Open road without another car in sight. Nine hours of this plus taking regular phone calls and getting lost twice!

I was so happy to finally arrive in Bukit Lawang, didn't even attempt to argue with the owner of the guest house when he told me he only had an expensive room left. I dropped my bag and headed straight back to the restaurant for a big bottle of Bintang.

I ended up having dinner with Robbie and Jude but declined their offer of accompanying them to the Jungle Party afterwards, I was desperate for my "expensive" bed after my ride from hell.

Only three in our trekking group, Airwun was our guide and his young helper was Theos. Nicola and her partner Steven were both from England and were a nice couple to trek with. Within 10 mins we'd done a pretty hard ascent and the jungle sweat was oozing from every pore on my body!

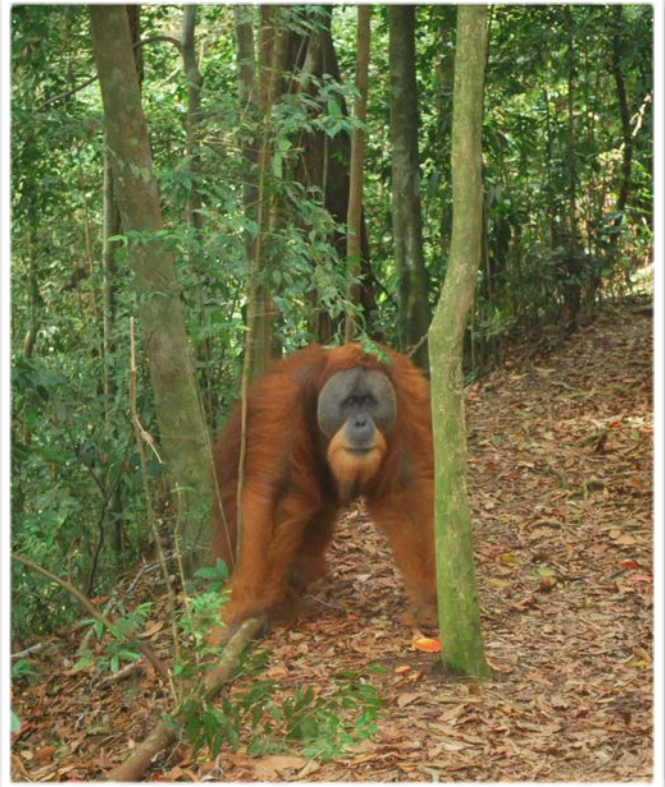
We got to see our first Orang-utan about 20 mins in. She was up a tree, a little way in the distance, on her own. She moved from one tree to another as we watched and then proceeded to pull branches down to form a nest to lay in. She then scratched herself and generally did monkey things. What an amazing experience, standing in a jungle setting, watching an Orang-utan in its natural habitat.

We walked for about 6 hours and I was pretty impressed with my fitness, this was real jungle trekking, up and down slopes with tree roots used for leverage to ascend and for holding onto while descending. Slipping and sliding on wet leaves blanketing

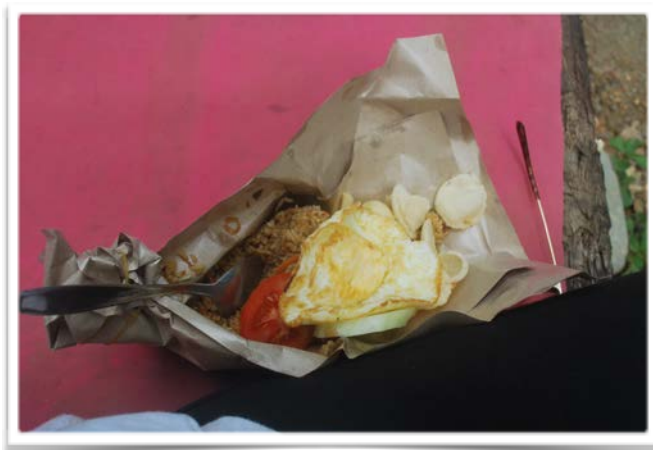


the trail or in the wet dirt. Deep rooted instincts came from somewhere about placement of my feet, and an ability to leverage myself up, around and down even with dodgy shoes on, only managing to arse up once.

Apart from the joy of managing the physicality of the trek, was the chance to see these amazing animals. We were lucky enough to see 8 Orang-utan's, mostly mums with babies and mostly very close up.



The most exciting part was actually the most scary. A 40 year old male we came across, demonstrated his manhood by getting a little uptight. "Move, move" was yelled at us as he came down from his tree and started towards us. Great to get some close up photos but a little nerve-wracking at the same time.



We ate Nasi Goreng (rice and veggies with an egg on top) with lovely fresh fruit for lunch sitting beside the river. We took off again having been given the option of the longer or the shorter afternoon trek. The shorter trek conjured up another mum and baby Orang-utan, sitting beside a small stream and waterfall.

We had to make four river crossings on our shorter trek and after the first two I was glad that they'd phoned ahead to bring the inner tubes downstream for us to be pulled across. The currents were getting really strong and with no shoes, the rocks underneath were extremely painful (yes, my feet have gotten too soft) as our guides raced us across the river. Much more fun to be dragged, by a young local with the most beautiful smile ever,

across in a
massive
inner tube
with rope



interwoven
beneath us so there was no slipping through.

Other Trekkers were arriving at our camp spot for the night as we did but from a different direction on the right side of the river. There were 9 of them and consisted of four Canadians, two Germans and one each of Sweden, Bulgaria and Greenland.

It was great to finally attempt removal of the sweat and dirt down in the river which was fast running and fairly cold. Hot tea and biscuits were served afterwards and it never fails to amaze me how good the simplest things can serve you when tired from good exercise. I sat cherishing that hot tea served in a old, chipped enamel cup while listening to the jungle sounds and watching the river race past.

Candles were lit and we dined on the ground with a veritable feast of bbq chicken, veggie curry, rice and a tasty, crispy papadum-type crackers.

There were fun games one of which the locals had been taught from a Spanish person and after a sweet bean dessert, compulsory singing per country. Really tired and not in the mood for more socialising with young-uns, I went first with my limited rendition of Pokarekare Ana. No one understood what I was singing anyway so it went down well.

Bed was a thin piece of rubber on the ground with a bed sheet and a small pillow, not bad for the jungle! Our roof and walls were made out of tarp and bamboo.

I did manage to get some sleep on the hard surface although there were definitely parts of my body complaining in unison at the injustice. I ignored them.



Breakfast was four slices of white bread with an omelette, tomato and cucumber sandwiched between and skewered together with the stem of a leaf.

All of us were carried across the river two by two on the inner tubes so we could walk to the waterfall on the other side. A small waterfall but strong and loud that filled a nice wee swimming pool for us. You could swim up to sit on rocks directly below the waterfall and enjoy a great massage. There



Perfectly timed action shot, looks like he's sitting on the water

was also jumps off a big rock into the river later on but I declined to join in the fun of that one. In the main part because not only had the pressure of the waterfall pushed my bikini bottoms down, it had also untied my bikini top, I was in a fit of laughter at my own embarrassment as I tried to fight the waters force and regain some dignity. Thankfully everyone either couldn't see the calamity through the spray or they politely pretended not to have seen a thing.

Our trip down river by inner tube happened after lunch. All our bags, shoes, cameras etc were loaded into strong plastics bags, wrapped into the rubber mats we'd slept on and tied very securely to the inner tubes. Six of us travelled together in this tied together inner-tube-raft with two locals holding long bamboo poles at either end of the raft to push us away from rocks. There was much laughter, singing and gasps of delight not just at the sudden dips where we got soaked by the rapids but also at the share beauty of the jungle surrounding us.

Always a lover of home comforts, it was nice to get back to clean off in a warm shower and put on clean clothes but only

after first drinking a Bintang while sitting in the river and chatting.

I decided not to stay in Bukit Lawang another day but instead share a private car with the English couple I'd traveled from Lake Toba with, back to Medan. They were flying to Banda Aceh as well. I made three attempts to book a flight with Garuda Airlines on my iPad until I finally had success. This seems to be the prerequisite number of times it takes when using less than brilliant wifi connections.

Moving on Again

We left around 9.30am having gotten little sleep. There was a guitarist and a drummer and a lot of Bintang. Thankfully the driver this time was a happy, friendly soul and better than that a decent driver! We made good time and managed to make two stop offs, one for western-type supplies and one at the Indonesian Bank to get my "old" money changed. The security guard told us the place didn't open for money changing until Friday . . . dam! But then he offered to change my money for me . . . hmmm. There was a lot of discussion between him and the driver with the result he'd give me 40,000 for each of my 50,000 which earned him \$3.85. More than happy with that, I was just glad to be rid of the very large, old notes nobody wanted. I also slipped the driver the same amount for his efforts in getting to the bank as how else I was going to make this happen I had had no idea.

The Medan departures area was a nice excitable surprise due to my lack of shopping ability in Cambodia. Here were clothes shops from Australia and England! I spent a good hour perusing their wares and then buying a coffee from Starbucks. Oh, the giddy delights. Then our plane was delayed by 2 hours!

Getting out of Banda Aceh airport is no easy matter unless you want to pay a significant amount, as in practically the cost of my accommodation for the night. My lovely travelling buddies, who had already not wanted to accept my offer of any money for the taxi from Bukit Lawang told me to jump in the car to their hotel and try and get transport from there. They were staying in a nice flash hotel and the "bell boy" was such a sweetheart! He carried my backpack out to the road and waited with me, as did my lovely travelling buddies, for a Becak



My Becak driver, Rizal and the bellboy

(motorbike taxi with a sidecar) to come along, which one did, finally!

My driver's English was good, but we had trouble finding my "non-flash" accommodation. It seems this town only caters to "flash packers". Now, almost 11 hours since I'd started off this morning, tired and with a headache he dropped me off at what would have to be one of the worst places I've ever stayed! And for the same price as my lovely accommodation on

the lake! It was a share bathroom with shower over the toilet, which at least it was a western toilet. Nothing was very clean in there but at least my bed had a clean sheet on, although I still lay my sarong over it and covered the pillow in my scarf.

I showered and headed out, as covered up as I could be, this is a very Muslim area of Sumatra. I sat down near the hotel for coffee and noodles as I wasn't game to journey far in the dark. As it was I was very much the centre of attention, being stared at by the men as I sat down. I can only imagine what they were thinking of me with my hair uncovered. Maybe they're used to westerners, tourists and non-Muslims and don't think too much about it or maybe they think me very disrespectful. It's probably better I have no idea.

I was in Scotland on Boxing Day 2004 when the magnitude 9 earthquake centred 160km from Banda Aceh shook the town and the massive tsunami followed a quick 10mins later. My first instinct was to somehow arrange to get there and help. I looked into it when I got back to Australia but found they were being very strict on ensuring that only those most qualified and experienced in disaster recovery got to go, which makes sense.

So 10 years later, I'm finally here and to see how much things have changed and improved. I'd arranged for my Becak driver, Rizal to pick me up at 8 the next morning to take me around all the tourist sites. There is still very definitely evidence of this massive natural disaster but also a lot of development beyond what this place had been before the tsunami in terms of infrastructure, economy, preparedness and ability to cope.

10 Years Later Visiting The Tsunami Site

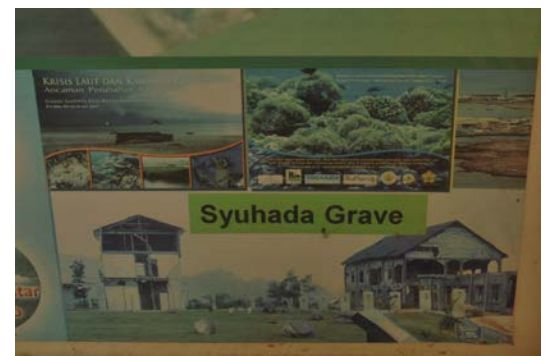


systems and Tsunami signs everywhere.

I was very proud to see New Zealand listed as one of the countries making a sizeable donation towards support and rebuilding.

The Tsunami Museum was pretty impressive for interactive technology and education on what actually took place, from a scientific and a victims point of view.

I visited the mass grave where remnants of the hospital stand and where the Tsunami & Disaster Mitigation Research Centre is. This building is a very real demonstration of what happens once the NGO's and their money leave town. A multi storey building with ramps and many offices, it has a wall dedicated to listing the functions it is supposed to be used for. As so often ends up being the case, the initial ideas are way beyond the level of ability to maintain or staff to undertake the functions.



Without the continued funding, 10 years later it appears all this building would be used for is to house thousands of people if another natural disaster does take place. Other than that all I saw were broken down office chairs, projector screens rusted out and whiteboards used to block off the entrance to stairs.

Back outside, a man came up to me to say hallo and ask where I was from. He said he was a Chinese-Indonesian and had lost both his parents and his brothers and sisters in the tsunami. He was in the south of Sumatra when it hit and the total loss of family and friends for him totalled 65. In visiting from Jakarta, I think he needed to talk to someone about it, he wasn't crying but his eyelashes were wet from when he had been. I was moved to hear his story and glad he had wanted to share as it made the whole thing more real for me.

Two of the tourist sites include boats brought inland by the wave. On removing the "tourist" trappings from my mind's eye and remembering that this actually happened, it still seemed unbelievable that the force of nature made the unreal and dramatic actually be the reality sitting in front of me.

This boat carried 29 people to safety on the wave before landing on this house



I also went to visit the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque, a stunning structure that served as a safe sanctuary for people to flee to during the Tsunami. My Mosque guide showed me where the water had risen to on the steps. Before this visit I'd watched footage in the museum of the solid wall of water, littered with cars, people and parts of buildings racing past the Mosque while people watched on unable to do little other than occasionally draw someone out.

This 1000 tonne ship was thrown inland 5km

There was a sign on the gate of the Mosque saying it was a Muslim area and Muslim dress needed to be adhered to. I looked at Rizal and asked "ok?" gesturing to myself. He smiled and said "sort of ok". I wrapped a scarf around my head and he said "better" and in entering the park a Muslim man leaving with his family gave me a thumbs-up sign and smiled.

Still, I wasn't suitable dressed to go close to the mosque and ended up putting on a hooded, floor length cloak provided for the event. I felt extremely unattractive but I guess that's part of the idea. I still wasn't allowed into the Mosque but could



take photos. I now understand why the Muslims weren't entering the Buddhist temple in Berestagi, if we're not allowed in theirs, I guess the presumption is they're not allowed in others. Or maybe it's simply they believe that their God will strike them down if they do? God knows . . . Or does he?

Hitting The Beach

Rizal ran me the 15kms down to Lhoknga Beach in his Becak. It was amusing the amount of smiles and even laughs I got, I presume for actually being in a Becak. My feeling is these very handy vehicles are for the poorer class and it seems odd for a westerner to be using one. I guess they're more used to the rich NGO workers using taxis.



We stopped for a lunch of very good fish curry and rice on the way, for the outrageous cost of \$2.30 for both of us. He dropped me off at Eddies Homestay which had a very nice room waiting for me although I hadn't bothered booking. I stayed for three nights and although the accommodation and local area was beautiful and extremely relaxing I soon realised that although, over the years my ability to "chill-out" has improved, with too much of it I start getting twitchy. I even began to wish I'd brought my

runners just to burn off some steam.

The hosts were really lovely and hospitable and the other residents, mostly chilled-out surfers were friendly. The menu was pretty good and fairly cheap but I was over-ready for simple, un-sugared or fried food. My body is complaining in many ways, one of which includes a definite growth in my middle section measurement!

I went for small walks around the area although it's fairly close to the main road but I found some wonderful views, puppies, kids and cows to amuse myself with. I got caught in a hour long storm one day on the beach but found shelter under a kind of pagoda and read my book while it raged around me.

The beach was beautiful white sands, stretched for miles and was basically deserted. Not comfortable swimming on my own

in the waves, one day I found a nice gentle spot just before a bend in the beach. There was less broken up coral here too and the water was lovely and cooling. Still a Muslim area I felt disrespectful to be in a bikini but the water was

too enticing and I made sure I ran in and out again so I was covered up again quickly. It was actually lovely to be sitting in the water on this beautiful beach on a crystal clear day with the call to prayers the only sound from the distant mosque other than the lap of the water.



I decided to check-out and spoil myself on my last night in Sumatra, in a swanky hotel. I was going to have to get up at 4am and spend 18 hrs in transit, door to door so I figured I deserved a break. Best of all was the swimming pool and the steak, veggie and mashed potato meal!

Rizal picked me up at 4.30am and laughed at my reply to his question about whether I would come back to Banda Aceh; "maybe no, but maybe yes".

19 April 2015



Sunset, The Pade Hotel, Banda Aceh