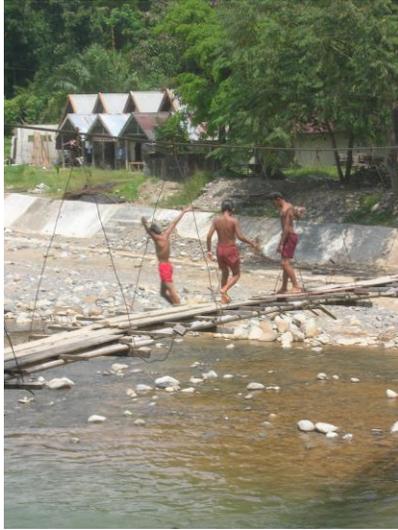


Wash Out

Taking a large, rickety bus between Medan and Bukit Lawang, on the Indonesian island of Sumatra, a young, local introduced himself to me and I knew he was going try to sell me something. Since he knew I was going to Bukit, he assumed he would want to get me into his hotel and probably a trek into the nearby Gunung Leuser Park. I told him where I had planned to stay, and he said that the hotel no longer existed. This was in my mind a typical scam, saying your hotel no longer existed and then getting you into their place. He said that heavy rains had washed half the city away and most of the places I



had wanted to stay were in the area that got washed out. It turns out he was right; the mudslide was one of the several natural disasters in Indonesia.

Bukit is trying to rebuild despite the devastating flood, partially caused by deforestation. This flood occurred a couple years before the famous tsunami on the northern tip of Sumatra. In Bukit, a new cement bridge was being built yet the old wooden footbridge, which swings precariously above the water, remains. New houses and restaurants are being built well above the riverbank in fear of another wash-out. Sadly, many of the destitute still live in a slum between the river and the new bus station.

Searching for orangutans is the lure for many when trekking around Bukit and

into Gunung Leuser Park. It is remarkable how these animals function as they climb from tree to tree and have an amazing ability to stay balanced. There are other animals to see such as the black and white spider monkey, but these are fairly common as I spotted a few of the monkeys outside my *losmen*, similar to a bed and breakfast. There are also some massive trees and other interesting plants one containing beetle nuts.



Immature beetle nuts serve as a type of drug, while mature are a cure for upset stomachs.

A shorter, yet enjoyable walk is to Gua Kampret, the Black Cave. The journey begins with a stroll past several restaurants in which many of the owners will want to chat. Many new restaurants are appearing, and they are trying to get tourists and spread the word. The walk continues through the high-class Bukit Lawang cottages and a small, organic farm. Jumping the farm fence, the small trail to the caves commences, passing several rubber trees. This rubber farm had the tree's bark cut which led to white sap dripping into a container made of coconut. The sap would then be used in making rubber products. Continuing to the cave, there was an entrance fee, but since no one was collecting I jumped the fence and made it to the cave. The cave is less interesting than the trip.

To the south of Bukit are the cooler, volcanic Karo Highlands with the tourist city of Berastagi. There are two active volcanoes, with Sibayak to the north of the city. The walk is pleasant, but the sulfur around the volcano is not. Locals place stones in the crater that spell out their names and their significant other. The walk down is okay but made more enjoyable by the hot springs that one can soak in.

Another trek outside Berastagi can be made to the Karo villages, belonging to the Karo, the first group to settle in the highlands. An hour walk south of Berastagi is the village of Gurusinga. The walk consists of passing several Catholic memorials and a lot of fields containing a variety of vegetables. There is lot of oranges but there other more exotic fruit as well as warm weather crops but as a lot of potatoes and lettuce. The people working in the fields were very friendly and often visited with me and gave me a lot of free food. I helped load oranges on to a pickup truck, played in a pickup volleyball game, helped make the woven crates used for holding the oranges and then made it to Gurusinga. The village is best known for old wooden stilt houses that are big enough to hold up to ten families. There are no partitions so it is one open room where everyone would sleep. The houses are elevated which is a common feature in this part of the world.



The road continues on to another village Lingaa Tula, which has many of the features of Gurusinga. There are more of the thatched houses on the way as well as more fruit to sample. People get from place to place by walking or cow powered carriages.



The actual city of Berastagi has some charm due to its coolness and power outings. The weather is a nice contrast to the rest of the island of Sumatra, which is largely wet and humid. The power outings add some excitement at night as well. There are several cafeteria style restaurants with rice, dried fish, vegetables and mystery meats.

Further south of Berastagi is Southeast Asia's largest freshwater lake, Danau Toba, and the island Pulau Samosir, located within the lake. The island has many small cities with the most accessible being Tuk Tuk. A ferry will drop visitors at the quay nearest the appropriate hotel. The city has a lot of tourists but is laid back. The island is a great place to walk around or else hire a motorcycle to explore the various sites. The nearby village Tomok contains the sarcophagus of Raja Sidabutar who was an important historical chief. North of Tuk Tuk is Ambarita which contains old stone chairs that were historical law courts. How old they are is debatable, with some saying they are about fifty years old and others a couple hundred

years old. Due to the tourists, there are several souvenir shops, with generally low-pressure salesman selling sometimes fairly unique indigenous trinkets.



music and a horse being slaughtered. I met four teenage girls who were dressed up for the festival and said they would be dancing a traditional dance later in the evening, so I felt obliged to stay. They were nice, but they wanted to get in every picture I wanted to take. The actual festival begins with prayers, followed by dancing, with the culmination being eating the horse which had been placed under a small canopy. The meal is free and seemingly everyone at the festival grabbed a handful of horse and rice at the same time, causing a near riot. I stayed in the background and a local was nice enough to grab a handful for me and put it on a paper plate.

The main city near the lake is Parapat, which seems busy compared to life on the island but is still rather calm. The city has mosques and an active market next to the dock to the island. I was there during an annual religious festival, which was fortunate. There was a building period of anticipation during the day fueled by



The biggest city in Sumatra and the fourth largest in Indonesia is Medan. My initial reaction was that the city was a dump, but upon further study it wasn't that bad. The main mosque, Mesjid Raya, is a huge yellow and green building with a black dome. The inside of the mosque is attractive as are the grounds, which is a cemetery. I got great views of the mosque from Zakia, my hotel located directly across from the mosque. I also got to hear the mosque via the 23-minute Call to Prayer at five in the morning, but I couldn't very well yell out my window and tell them to shut up.

The rest of the city is a mixed bag. Only two rooms of the Maimoon Palace can be viewed and thus is rather ho hum. The Mansion of Tjong A Fie's exterior is rather faded and its interior is closed to the public. More attractive is the Hindu temple of Sri Mariamman due to its vibrant colors and statues of the Hindu God Kali. Also impressive is the Taoist Temple of the Eastern Mountain due to its large pink dragon candles and statues of warriors. With the extensive burning of incense, there is a lot of ash that makes the floor slippery. There is a full-time ash sweeper in the temple, yet many worshipers still slip.

A unique trip near Medan is a crocodile farm on the outskirts of the city. There are hundreds of crocs divided by age and size. They were fairly docile because of the midday heat but periodically there is some splashing as they wrestle with each other. The pen walls are precarious, as they are only four feet high, typical of Indonesian safety

standards. The rest of the farm has snakes and a caged monkey who seemed to be crying and wanted out.

Although a difficult journey at times, Sumatra was not a wash out. The big city, Medan, has its high points. Bukit has some nice trekking as does the cooler highlands. Finally, the island of Pulau Samosir allows for relaxation. Horse is pretty good to eat as well.