

Indonesia

RIDING THE RING OF FIRE





We are at the Butterworth dock on Malaysia's west coast, and the morning's already a scorcher. Stinging sweat drips into my eyes as I instinctively duck my head; mere feet above me, my precious motorbike is lofted high and swings like a 700-pound pendulum as it's winched from the dockside to the ravaged hull of a weary fishing boat. After a full stop, we thread the blue nylon rope and lash my bike to the sun baked deck alongside Lisa's already secured 650 GS. The short 160-mile passage across the Strait of Malacca from Malaysia to Sumatra will take two days. Indonesia here we come.

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Photography: Simon and Lisa Thomas

It's the end of the wet season on the world's largest archipelago. Here on the sultry island of Sumatra, the rains have yet to finish. At the Belawan dock, my left foot pushes down, and the audible "clunk" as first gear engages is reassuring. I sigh and let a grin smear its way across my face as we ride out into the congested Medan city traffic.

The Pacific Ring of Fire

Meandering in second gear, I let myself consider the ambitious journey ahead if we're to reach northern Australia by June. Running 3,000 miles along the Equator,

Indonesia's landscape is dominated by volcanoes and is the world's fourth most populous country (home to an astounding 200 ethnic groups and more than 245 million people). Lisa and I have six weeks to traverse a country comprising of 17,504 tropical islands. Many are uninhabited; some are even unnamed.

South of Sumatra's largest city (Medan), the air is saturated, and we're sweat soaked as I look to my GPS for the quickest escape route from the suburbs. In the gentle morning light, vendors open shutters and organize their stock to ready for the day's trade. Squat wooden homes rub shoulders with bright brick stores with low sloping tin roofs that are vividly painted with logos of Pepsi and Maggi Noodles, a local favorite. A horse and cart rattle over the broken tar in front of a mint green wall. I'm jolted from my daydream as we're buzzed by dozens of scuffed mopeds as we ease on the brakes pulling to a stop at traffic lights. To our right a local man walks the largest pink pig I've ever seen.

We are riding due south along the route "Jalan Bandar Baru," a tar ribbon winding across a carpet of rolling green.

The Legend of Krakatoa

As the hours pass by, a pattern is building; when we emerge from one small town, we are instantly surrounded by lush green foliage for a few minutes before being thrown back into the sprawl and congestion of the

next town. Volcanoes dominate Indonesia's landscape, and with more than 130 lava-spewing peaks, this country is one of the most geographically violent places on Earth. In 1883, the infamous eruptions of Krakatoa off the Sumatran coast produced both the most violent volcanic events and loudest sound in recorded history. The blast was heard more than 3,000 miles away. The eruptions and tsunami killed more than 36,417 people. On the outskirts of Beragasti low clouds roll in, and we decide not to take the side roads around the Sibayak and Pinto volcanoes; it isn't a big deal, as we'll go by 32 more on Sumatra before we cross to Java.

Roadside Repairs

"What's up?" I ask Lisa at a set of lights. "Nothing's happening. I can't move," came the reply. Hemmed in by traffic, we're going nowhere fast; a quick inspection identifies a snapped clutch cable. Under the inquisitive gaze of 20 locals, we push Lisa's bike to the front of a small café and set about yanking out the broken cable and attaching the already in situ new one. The café's low roof acts as our parasol. As we finish up amid a volley of questions about our journey, I receive a gentle tap on my shoulder. From my knelt position, I turn and look up as a slender, toothless, older man pushes an ice-cold bottle of 7UP into my greasy hand. A young server places two bowls of Nasi Goreng (a fried rice dish served for breakfast, lunch, and dinner) on a table close by and with a nod indicates

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we should eat. A half hour of laughter and easy chat blows by.

On the outskirts of another small village, we accelerate and splash through deep muddy puddles left from recent rain. To our left, rich dark fertile soil has been plowed and is ready for planting; to our right, a contrasting thicket of dense rainforest absorbs the light.

In the low gears we're climbing steep switchbacks, mindful of the deep potholes on the corners. Near the top, we slow. Our progress is halted as a dilapidated truck battles with the incline and its panicked cargo of mud-en-crusting oxen. On the brow, a white-washed Christian chapel nestles back against a copse of wide-leafed palm trees, and a group of young girls dressed in immaculate pink walk home from school.

A Sleeping Turquoise Giant

We are riding high above Lake Toba, the largest in Indonesia. Its still turquoise waters beautifully disguise the super volcano that lies just beneath. The rain forest has been replaced with Sumatran tropical pine forest; the air is pungent and smells sweet. Suddenly a clap of thunder erupts so violently that we're both shaken. Simultaneously, the skies darken, the heavens open, and we're instantly drowned. The deluge has lasted mere minutes but has made our descent to the port in Parapat a slippery one. The steel ramp of the ferry that we'll catch to Toba Island of Samosir rattles under the weight of our rolling bikes; negotiating the fresh carcass of a dead water buffalo

falo makes for a gruesome distraction as we slip on the worn deck.

Disembarking, it's a short jaunt to Carolina Cottages, and after paying a mere \$13, we are soon checked in. From the raised porch of our simple wood cabin, the sunset view across the lake is nothing short of breathtaking. Just below us a pure white egret lands elegantly to feed. Indonesia is casting its spell.

The last three days since leaving Lake Toba have been a blur of heavy rain, mud-washed roads, and sweet, strong black coffee in roadside cafés where weather-worn men play dominoes and draw with the panache of movie stars on thin smoky cigarettes. We've shunned the coastal route for the quieter inland central passage, our winding route at times vanishing into the humid rainforest.

Back to School

We are riding in the Minangkabau Highlands and south of Bukittinggi, a bustling city steeped in Colonial Dutch history and the birthplace of some of the founders of the Republic of Indonesia. We're taking the bends of the new road that skirts Lake Singkarak at speed, leaning hard into an open right-hander before shifting and setting up for our line through the left. Pulling up in Singkarak town, we position the bikes in front of a traditional Sumatran rumah gadang (family long house). Its tall sweeping roof gables provide a unique style; the roof looks like the sail from a tall ship. Every beam and surface is intricately decorated



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ed with carvings and painted artistry. “Can I help?” asks a smartly dressed man in khaki trousers and a blazer as we check over the map. Our friend introduces himself as Mr. Williams and the head teacher of the school we’re parked in front of. “Would you care to take some refreshment? Some traditional Indonesian tea? It’s very good,” he continues.

We park our bikes inside the school grounds, and wildly enthusiastic students use their cell phones to photograph each other astride the bikes before we join teachers and female pupils for a group photo. The young students are each wearing an immaculate white hijab, a veil that covers the head and shoulders. In a concrete-walled classroom, we spend an hour answering questions about life, the West, work, and travel. In the center of the class, a young boy stands and nervously but sincerely asks, “During your time in my country, have you been intimidated or frightened, and is it true that people in the west think that Muslim people are bad?” Wow. What a question to be faced with before lunch! I answer as carefully as I can, “We have only experienced warmth and friendship in the countries we’ve traveled through.” I continue, “There are only two kinds of people in the world; smart people and stupid people. Stupid people believe everything they are told. Smart people use their own experiences to form their opinions.” A roomful of

beaming smiles confirms that my answer is well received.

Java Joy Ride

On Sumatra’s southern tip (and the port of Bakauheni), torrents of fast flowing mud pour across the steep road to the ferry where we pay \$18 per bike and enter the belly of a new looking vessel for the 17-mile crossing of the Sunda Strait to Java. On deck and to our port side (left), Anak Krakatau (Child of Krakatoa) gently puffs a tower of smoke into the sky. The blast of a horn has us running back to the bikes. As the heavy bow doors swing open, we emerge exhausted into the dusty wetness of the most populous island in the world. We struggle to hold our road position on Java’s congested streets. South of Jakarta, the island’s capital, we’re knee deep in mud slurry as 25 miles of road are dug in preparation for repair. Detouring north of Labuhan city, we are at last clear of the mire. In the small villages, children sell bottles of moped fuel and chase us barefoot in hopes of a sale. In the early afternoon we pass emerald green paddy fields that sit between the cones of sleeping volcanoes. By the roadside, women scatter rice on the asphalt to dry while their young children splash naked in the puddles. The twists and turns of the road lead us upward and into the mountains. The cooler air is a welcome relief. After a full day of riding, the bikes are now parked close by, it’s pitch black, and

we are physically drained and within ear shot of the crashing waves pounding Java’s southern coast. At a small roadside café the tattered plastic roof flutters in the evening breeze as we dig into spicy chicken soup and a peanut shrimp sambal (spicy chili based dish).

We’ve had four 5 a.m. starts since arriving on Java, and this morning has been no exception. Pre dawn, we are atop the incredible Borobudur temple, the world’s biggest Buddhist monument and a UNESCO World Heritage site. A hushed whisper of excitement is growing as the sun crests the distant mountains. With our cameras at the ready, our lenses fly into a flurry as the piercing orange light illuminates the 72 Buddha statues on Borobudur’s top platform. Built in the 9th century, the construction is unbelievable. Six square platforms are topped by three circular platforms; all built entirely without mortar. A small plaque states that the temple contains 2,672 relief panels, 504 Buddha statues, and it took an estimated 75 years to complete. Surrounded by Buddhist devotees, we marvel and shoot 200 photos before the heat of the day pushes us back to the sanctuary of the Lotus 1 Guesthouse, just a short walk away.

Lunar Landscape and a Sea of Sand

Past hilltop settlements, pristine lakes, dense rainforest, and 800 miles of congest-

ed fume belching traffic, we are approaching Bromo Tengger Semeru National Park. Ahead, Lisa’s bike backfires loudly as we negotiate the very steep and tight turns of the narrow dirt track from the rim of the Tengger caldera to the floor of this ancient and vast super volcano. Standing on the pegs, we are hard on the throttle, traveling through a lunar landscape as we cross the Tengger Sand Sea. For three miles, we slide in the deep ash-like waves. To our right Mount Semeru emerges from the sand like a giant. This stratovolcano is in a near constant state of growl, belching steam and ash into the sky every 30 minutes. At 12,000-foot tall, it’s the highest mountain on Java.

On the eastern rim of the caldera, we navigate the potholed streets of Camara Lawanga village and book into the Cemara Indah Hotel. At just \$10 per person, the room is a steal and provides incredible views across the entire Caldera Masif. The following morning, we roll out of bed at 3 a.m. to join a Russian couple in a hired jeep that takes us up to Gunung Penanjakan (view point). As the sun breaks the distant horizon, the scene is biblical. From our lofty perch, we can see five separate volcanoes inside the Tengger Caldera: Mount Bromo (7,641 feet), Mount Batok (8,103 feet), Mount Kursi (8,467 feet), Mount Watangan (8,730 feet), and Mount Widodaren (8,694 feet). In the sky, low clouds blend with plumes of steam and ash, the mix gently illuminated in shades of red, orange, and pink by the still rising sun. Half a mile below on the caldera floor, waves of cool morning fog float across the sand sea before being evaporated by the day’s new heat. In the afternoon we venture to the base of Mount Bromo without our bags and gear and walk the 253 steps to the sulfur laden mouth of the volcano itself. Following local tradition, we buy small wreaths of flowers and toss them into the abyss in the hopes of calming the spirits within. Back at the Cemara Indah hotel we collapse tired, but happy, after an incredible day.

Island Pit-Stops

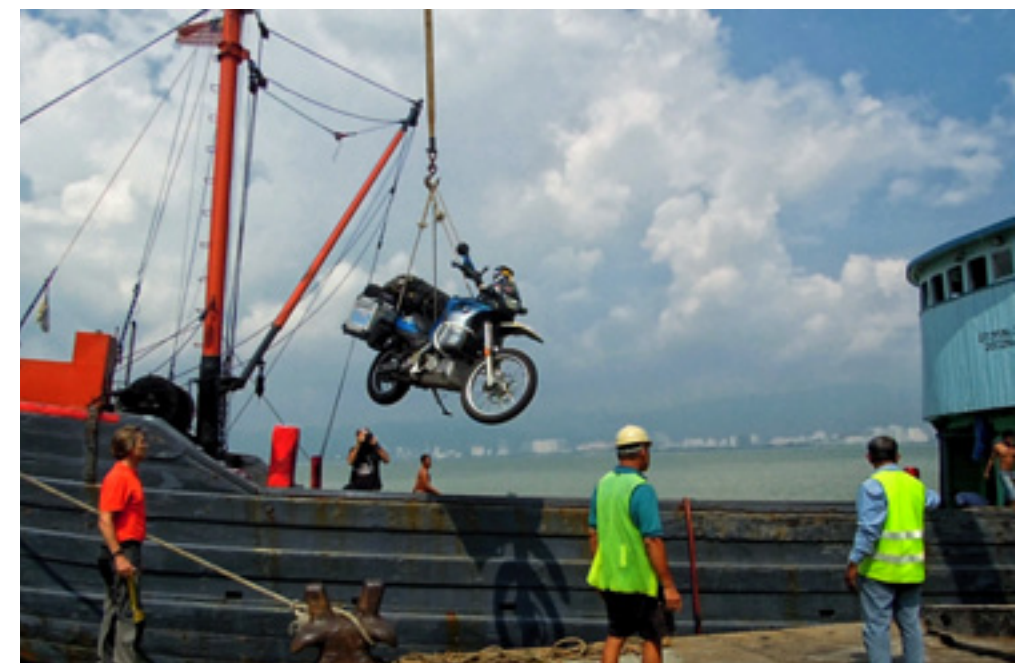
Time is pushing on and running short if we are to reach Australia. Reeling from Java’s eye popping beauty, we’re back on the bikes and pushing east. We pit-stop for just one night on the hedonistic, tourist-entrenched paradise of Bali with its 20,000

hillside temples, white sandy beaches, and packed resorts. A battered ferry delivers us to the island of Lombok. We cruise through Mataram, the island’s capital, then out through villages where waterfalls cascade down to the road. In the shadow of Mount Rinjani (Indonesia’s second highest volcano), we head to Lombok’s northeast coast and Senggigi beach to collect our next transport.

We have leap-frogged the islands of Sumbawa and Flores, and at last we are on Timor. This morning’s mountainous, rambling, coast-hugging route has seen us across the border and into East Timor. Dili, East Timor’s capital city is awash with white UN 4x4s. To our left a small painted sign reads “Toll marine,” which is the transport company we’ll use to ship our motorcycles. We made it, just! In a few days, we will sail for Australia, our 6th continent.

Indonesia’s spell is powerful, and it has provided us with some of the best touring we’ve had in years. We have ridden through glorious sunrises and ancient, rainforest-adorned mountains. We have been met with enthusiasm and friendliness at every turn. This is what motorcycling is all about.**RR**

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Facts & Information

Indonesia

Total Mileage
Approximately 4,013 miles



In General

Indonesia consists of 17,508 islands; only 6,000 are inhabited. The largest is Sumatra. Indonesia's location (on the "ring of fire") makes it the site of numerous volcanoes (at least 150 are active) and frequent earthquakes. Forests cover approximately 60 percent of the country. However, millions of acres have been cleared for the palm oil industry. The official national language is Indonesian, a form of Malay. Not officially an Islamic state, 87.2 percent of Indonesia's population is Muslim. Currently, the exchange rate is approximately \$1 to 9.8 IDR (rupiah). ATMs can be found in most cities, and U.S. dollars are easy to exchange. Carry cash for use in the more rural areas. May to September is a good time to travel, but it's hot and humid year-round in the coastal areas.

How to Get There

U.S. citizens are granted a 30-day visa upon arrival; current cost is \$25. There are two international airports on the island of Java (Jakarta and Surabaya) and one on Bali. The major international shipping connection is between Malaysia and Sumatra. Ferries connect most of the major islands with frequent services. However, some operate only on a bi-weekly (every two weeks) schedule (i.e. Flores to west Timor). A carnet de passage is required if you are bringing in your own vehicle.

Food & Lodging

Rice is the staple food across the islands. Nasi goreng (fried rice), mie goreng (fried noodles), and gado-gado (vegetables topped with peanut sauce and sliced boiled egg) are some typical dishes.

Most cities have medium sized three star hotels. Bali offers plenty of four- and five-star holiday resorts. Budget losmen (staying in someone's home) are available from \$5 up. If you prefer this, expect zero privacy, minimal or non-existent sanitary facilities, basic food, often no electricity, and perhaps bedbugs and rats as roommates!

Roads & Biking

Traffic drives on the left side of the road. Drivers often create extra lanes regardless of the lane markings, and local motorcyclists weave in and out of traffic ignoring most traffic regulations. You will share the road with pedicabs, horse and ox carts, pushcarts, cows, sheep, goats, and over laden small motorcycles!

Contact Information

- Up to date information on visa requirements and travel advice: www.travel.state.gov/travel
- General travel information: www.travel-indonesia.com

Books & Maps

- Indonesia Travel Atlas by Periplus Editors, Tuttle Publishing, ISBN 978-0804841986, \$16.95
- *Lonely Planet Indonesia* by Ryan Ver Berkmoes, ISBN 978-1741798456, \$33.99
- Indonesia Travel Map, Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd, ISBN 978-0794607258, \$8.95

Motorcycles & Gear

1999 BMW R 1150 GSA
2002 BMW F 650 GS

Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega Pro
Jacket and Pants: Touratech Companero
Helmets: Airoh Aviator
Boots: MX boots -Alpinestars Tech 6 and Gaerne SG10