

Cycle Touring Indonesia (2) Bintang, Bakso and Bali Beaches



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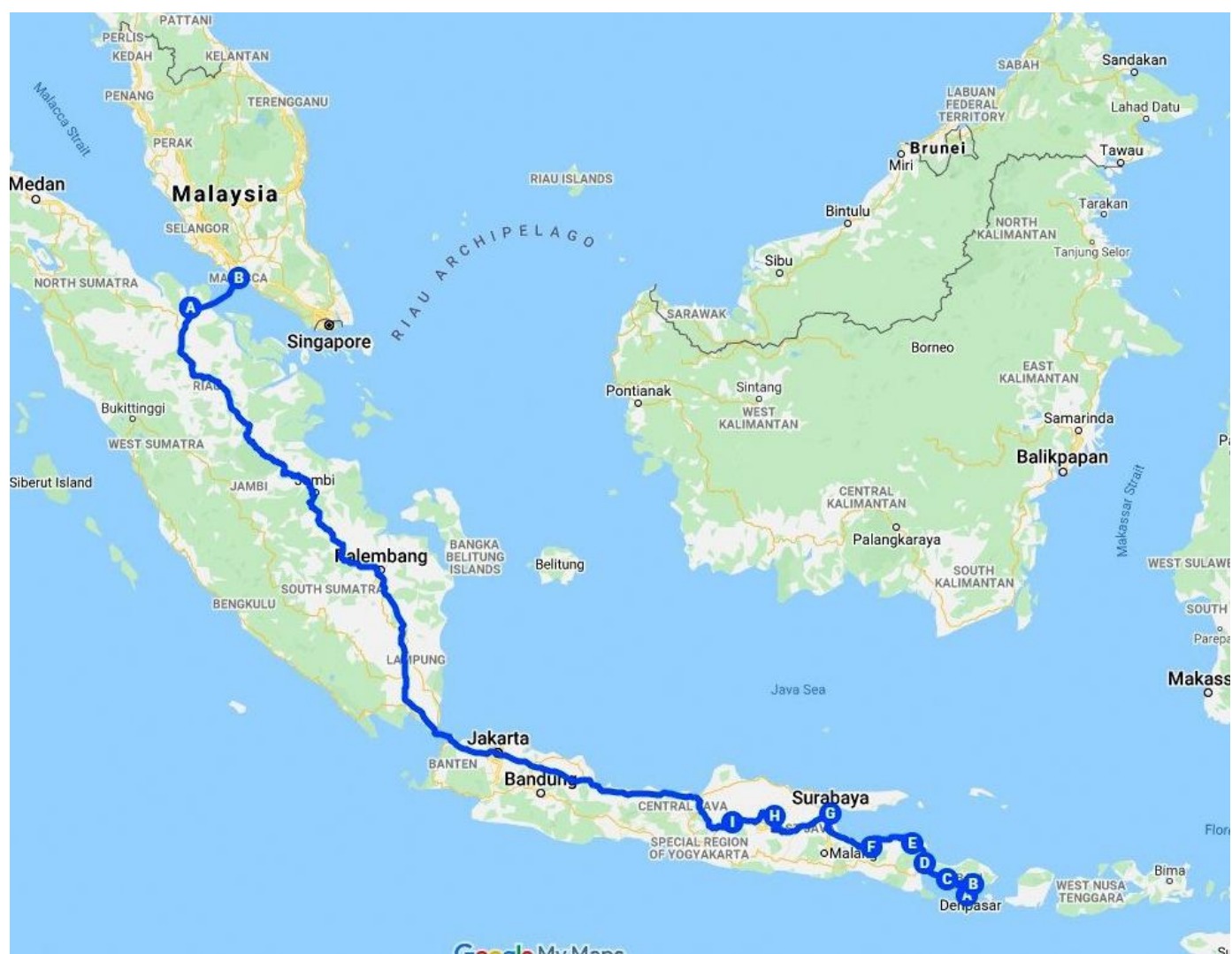




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Acknowledgements

The road through Bali and Java offered more than miles; it offered moments of unexpected grace. To the strangers who stepped out of their day to offer water, shelter, or simple kindness — your generosity was a soft wind at my back. You reminded me that the world is stitched together by small mercies.

To my sister, Amanda, guardian of my scattered words and keeper of the record. This blog carries your quiet devotion in every page.

To Val Abrahamse, who held the shape of my life while I wandered far from it: your steady care made it possible for me to chase a dream without fear of what might unravel behind me. I travelled lightly because you carried the weight.

This blog is not only a record of where I travelled, but of those who helped me keep moving. My gratitude runs deeper than these words can hold.



Bintang, Bakso and Bali Beaches

A Month of Cycling, Culture, and Connection

Prologue

There's a unique thrill in setting out with little more than a bicycle and a sense of curiosity. As I bid farewell to familiar faces in Cape Town and touched down in Bali, I felt the pulse of adventure quicken. Indonesia—an archipelago of vibrant cultures, ancient temples, and untamed landscapes—beckoned with the promise of discovery even on a second visit. This journey would be more than pedalling a bike; it would be a tapestry woven from moments of awe, challenge, and connection. With each pedal stroke, I hoped to find not just new roads, but new perspectives—on the world, and on myself.



Bali

130 Km – 6 Days

Farewell Cape Town: The Journey Begins

The moment had finally arrived to bid farewell to my family and friends, and while I couldn't visit with everyone, I was grateful for the precious moments I shared with my mom. A highlight was the delightful day I spent with my long-time Facebook friend, Diana. Together, we explored the stunning winelands of the Cape, where we were entertained by a charming duck parade. We savoured a glass of wine while lounging on the lush green lawn—pure bliss.

During my stay in Cape Town, I hiked the majestic mountains, ran along the beachfront, and enjoyed spirited paddles with my dragon boat friends. Countless nights were spent around the crackling barbecue fires, sharing stories and laughter under the starry skies. I only managed to cycle once, though! Let's just say the bicycle might as well have stayed in its box for all the use I got out of it.

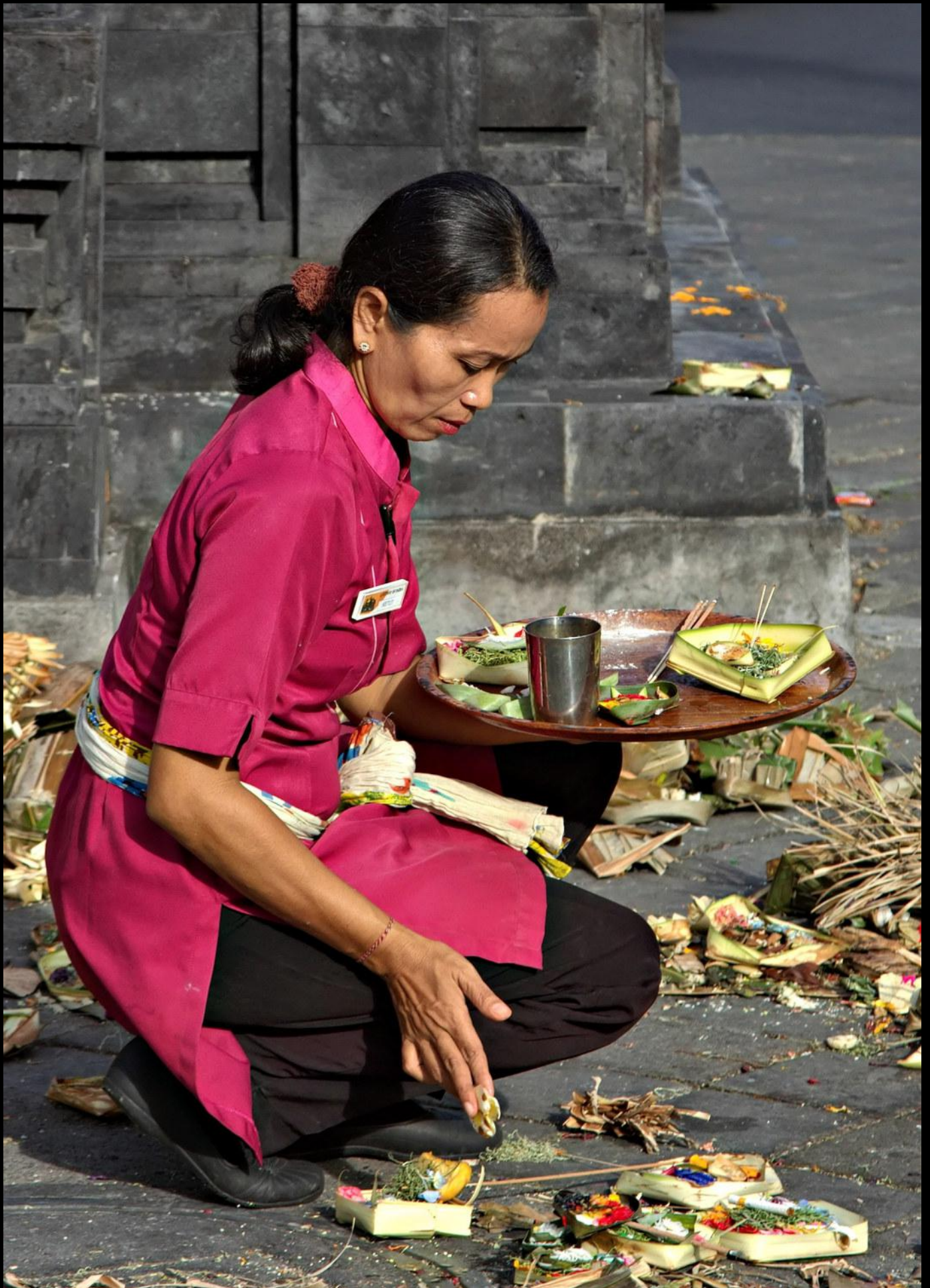
Finally, on the 9th of January, I boarded a flight to Indonesia, where I planned to slowly make my way to Malaysia to meet my friend Janice for her inaugural cycle touring ride from Kuala Lumpur to Bangkok. I couldn't wait to reconnect with life on the bike and was excited to witness the changes Indonesia had undergone since my last cycling journey through this remarkable country several years ago, when I travelled from Malaysia to Australia.



Arrival in Bali: First Impressions and Tropical Air

Around 24 hours after taking off, I finally touched down in Bali, and I was ready to escape the airport and breathe in some fresh tropical air! Bali, located just eight degrees south of the equator, greeted me with hot and humid weather, exactly as I had expected. I hailed a taxi instead of wrestling with my bike in the intense humidity. The cab took me to Komala Indah Cottages, where bungalows nestled in a beautiful, lush garden. Their breakfast deal included coffee, toast, jam, and bananas—a perfect start to my day.

After settling in, I withdrew some local currency, bought a SIM card, paid for my stay, and even treated myself to a large Bintang beer. I settled on the steps, sipping my drink and chatting with fellow travellers. However, despite my long and tiring day, the time difference hit me hard, and I found myself still wide awake at 3 a.m. Bali is five hours ahead of where I came from, and my internal clock was completely out of sync.

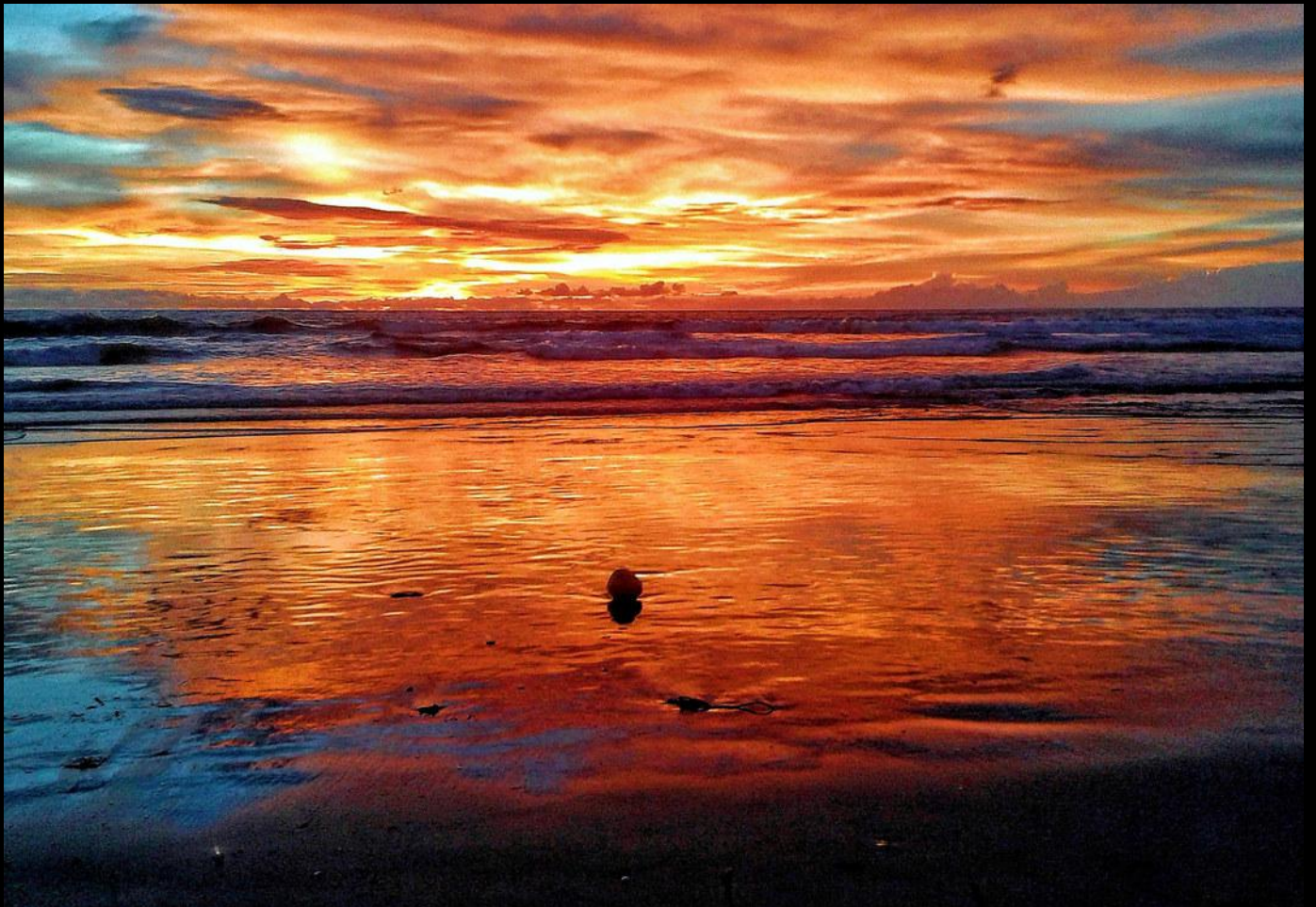


Settling In: Reassembling the Bike and Exploring Kuta Beach

I didn't roll out of bed until 9 a.m., and by the time I finally got moving, the sun was already blazing, making my morning jog a sweaty affair. Afterwards, I reassembled the bicycle, packed my bags and then headed to the local store for some must-have goodies.

Bali, with its vibrant energy and stunning landscapes, has definitely earned its reputation as a top tourist hotspot. Still, I found it magical. Walking along the iconic Kuta Beach, surrounded by colourful vendors hawking their souvenirs, transported me back to my very first visit seven years ago.

As the sun began to dip below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink, I was mesmerised by the surfers effortlessly carving through the waves, and I watched them with a cold Bintang beer in hand. Although the atmosphere at Kuta Beach can be pure chaos, I soaked it all in, loving every moment.



Tech Troubles and a Sunset Run

My plan was to start my ride today, but I encountered software problems and decided it was best to resolve them before getting underway. It took hours, and eventually, I had to call Microsoft support, who also had trouble reloading the programs. The connection was painfully slow, and it wasn't until 10 p.m. that everything was finally up and running. Consequently, I didn't get to see much of Bali or its beaches, and I only went out once (while the upload was slow) to marvel at what Bali has to offer.

Surprisingly, I found it to be still quite Balinese, despite being such a touristy island. This time, I waited until sunset to head out for my run. It turned out to be a glorious evening, and the sunset was genuinely spectacular. I was extremely grateful to have the desire and will to run. I had planned to jump in the ocean afterwards, but by the time I finished, the sun was long gone, and I still needed to rinse my sweaty running gear. Soon, it was time for my daily Bintang and Mie Goreng (stir-fried noodles) laden with chillies.











Rainy Roads to Ubud: Temples and Rice Terraces

The next morning, I got on my bike and zipped over to the Pelni ferry office to gather information about a ferry to Singapore. I was excited at the thought of meeting Janice in Malaysia in just a month and therefore had to make my way to Kuala Lumpur as quickly as possible. The friendly staff at the Bali office informed me that a ferry departs from Tanjung Priok in Jakarta for Batang, arriving the very next day. From Batang, multiple ferries whisk travellers away to Singapore throughout the day, with only about an hour of travel time.

I returned to my lodging to pack my bike for the ride ahead. A quick stop at the bike shop had me leaving with a fresh pair of bright red pedals that added a pop of colour to my bike. By the time I hit the road, it was well past midday, and I was excited to get going.

Setting off from Kuta, I pedalled toward the quaint village of Mengwi, where the stunning Taman Ayun Temple awaited. This picturesque collection of temples, nestled within lush gardens, made the journey feel like travelling through a living postcard. The road between Kuta and Mengwi took on a magical atmosphere, lined with vendors offering beautiful temple paraphernalia at every turn. Unfortunately, my timing wasn't perfect; heavy rain began to pour just as I arrived, leaving me with hardly any time to take photos.

As the rain finally eased, I pressed on toward Ubud, riding along a path adorned with vibrant green rice terraces and intricate temples that seemed to leap out from the landscape. Just shy of reaching Ubud, an almighty clap of thunder nearly made me fall off the bike. Immediately afterwards, rain began to hammer down.



By a stroke of luck, I spotted accommodation and ducked inside, likely looking like a drowned rat. The kind lady at the desk must have taken pity on my bedraggled appearance, offering me a generous discount. I felt a flicker of guilt for my luck, especially knowing that the room came with air conditioning and hot water—precious comforts after a day of battling the elements.





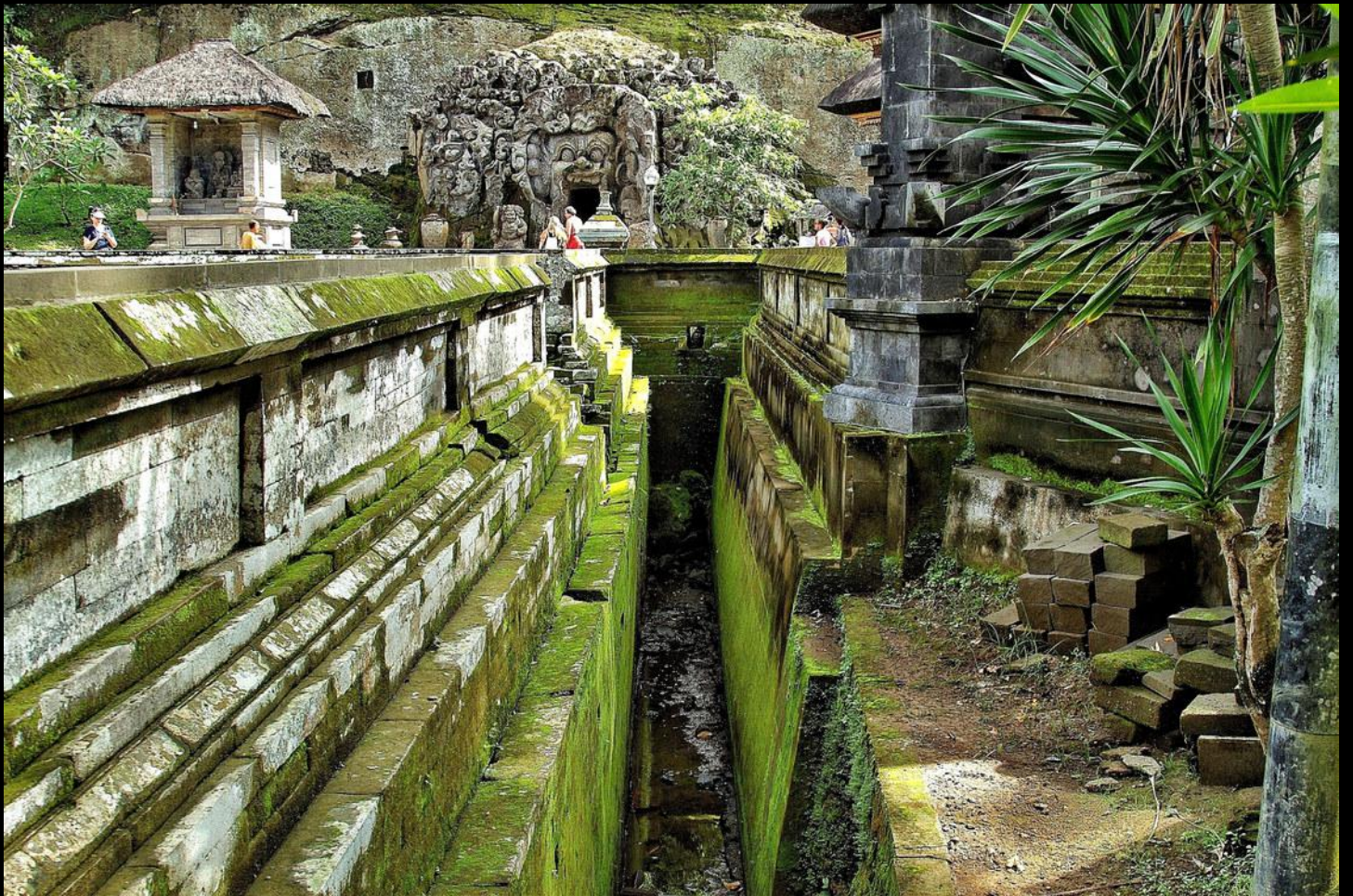
Ubud to Medewi Beach: Ancient Caves and Coastal Rides

"Did you sleep well?" my host asked, smiling, palms together, fingers touching her forehead. What lovely people the Balinese are. Included in the room rate was a scrumptious breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, fruit, and Indonesian coffee, which was served on my little veranda. At the same time, the sweet smell of incense drifted across from the offerings.

One can't stare into space all day, and I waved my kind host goodbye. Before getting underway, I first swung by the Goa Gajah or Elephant Cave, which dates to the ninth century. I'm unsure whether it means the cave was dug out in the ninth century (it's pretty tiny inside) or whether the time refers to the carvings around the cave entrance and the bathing ghats (excavated in the 1950s). To enter the cave (now a temple), one needed a sarong, which I donned so I wouldn't anger the fierce-looking demons.

The rest of the day was marred by undulating riding. Once over the high point, I sped downhill to the coast past scenic rice terraces, where I had to take the obligatory Bali rice terrace shot. I didn't take one but hundreds. The rest of the evening was spent sifting through them.

Although the coastal route was hectic and narrow, it was immensely picturesque. Despite staying as far to the side as possible, the ride remained challenging. I passed several surf camps and other idyllic-looking beaches and eventually settled on Medewi Beach, which boasted a handful of places to stay, all reasonably priced. Once showered, I sauntered to the nearest vendor for my daily bakso soup and beer.







Java

1,092 km – 23 days

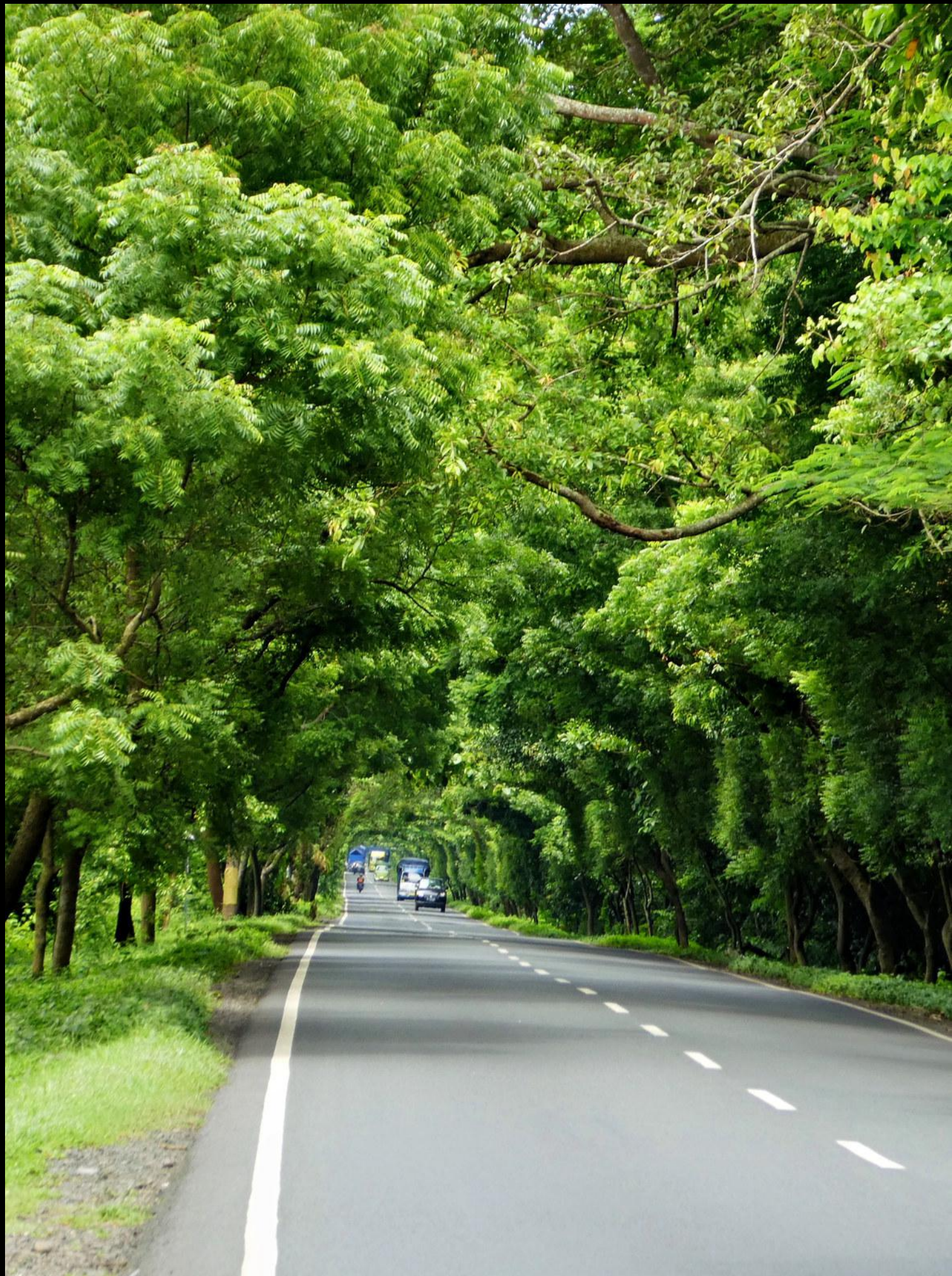
Crossing to Java: Ferry Adventures and Midnight Crater Hike

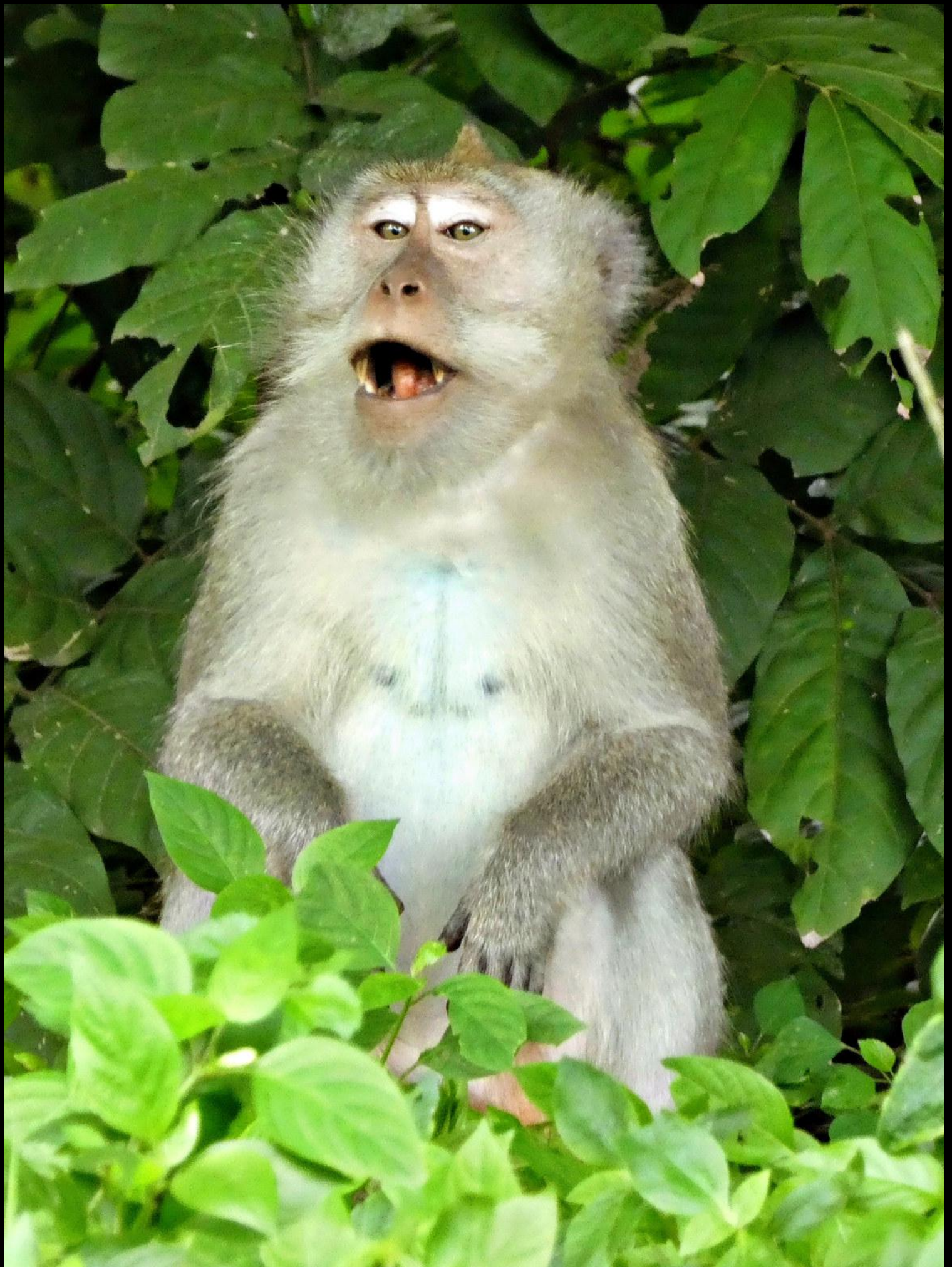
Breakfast was an interesting affair. It consisted of a 'parcel' accompanied by a steaming cup of authentic Indonesian coffee. The parcel contained a mix of rice and other ingredients, all wrapped in a banana leaf and secured with a toothpick or a slender bamboo stick. After savouring this unique meal, I hopped on my bike and set off for Gilimanuk, where ferries whisked travellers away to the Island of Java.

The ride was nothing short of magical, flanked by majestic mountains on one side and the sparkling ocean on the other, with rice paddies stretching endlessly in between. Pedalling through the national park, I was surrounded by a lush tapestry of greenery, where vehicles had carved a shaded path through the overhanging branches. Along the way, playful monkeys darted across the busy road, adding a touch of wilderness to the ride.

The ferry ride from Gilimanuk to Java Island was quick—barely 10 minutes—but the wait for departure stretched to about an hour. Once on Java Island, I made my way to the Banyuwangi Beach Hotel. It promised glamour, but for \$3-\$6 a night, I wasn't expecting a palace. I decided to splurge a little and opted for a \$6 room—truly living the high life! LOL.











The real reason for my stay was to visit a nearby crater lake. The visit began at midnight, and I was picked up for a one-and-a-half-hour drive up the mountain, followed by a hike up a steep, winding path that took an additional hour to reach the crater rim. This is where things became surreal. A steep descent led into the heart of Kawah Ijen Lake's crater, where toxic, sulphurous smoke billowed ominously from the volcano's vent. A guide and a mask came with the package, which should have alerted me to the stark reality of the conditions ahead.

What shocked me even more was witnessing the miners working in such harrowing conditions, digging for sulphur deep within the crater and hoisting their burdens up the almost vertical slopes on shoulder poles. They trudged through clouds of acrid smoke that can only be described as a "medieval vision of hell." Bright blue flames of sulphur flickered on the crater floor, a vivid reminder of the dangers they faced without even a mask for protection.

This journey to the crater lake was a profound and unforgettable experience—one that opened my eyes to the beauty of nature, even in its most perilous forms, and to the incredible resilience of those who work amidst its challenges.

By the time I returned at 7:00 a.m., I hadn't slept or eaten since breakfast the previous morning. It was high time for a hearty meal and a much-needed nap!







Into the Heart of Java: Situbondo's Daily Life

With a population of 260 million, Indonesia is a vibrant tapestry of life. A staggering 58% of this population calls Java Island home, making it the most densely populated island on the planet. This abundance of people means the narrow roads can feel like a chaotic river of humanity, with potholes adding an extra challenge to cycling. As I rode through the gritty landscape, I stumbled upon a broken-down truck that had become an unintentional gathering place. Its drivers were engrossed in a board game drawn right on the asphalt, while others adeptly collected food and cash from the traffic whizzing by.

The first few days in a new country can feel like sensory overload, with every sight and sound a fresh experience. Even though this was my second visit to Indonesia, the thrill was as strong as ever. If I were to document everything that intrigued me, it would surely fill a book! This particular day was no exception. After purchasing a bottle of water, I stepped outside and caught sight of someone measuring my bike. The poor guy was hard at work, measuring everything in sight — from gutters to paving stones. And just when I thought I'd seen it all, I encountered a stark-naked individual casually strolling by. While I knew the Dani tribe from New Guinea had a reputation for minimal clothing, I doubted these folks hailed from there. Their nudity seemed more tied to eccentricity than tribal customs.



The rest of the day eased into a more familiar rhythm as I ventured through quaint settlements, gliding past lush, green rice paddies framed by majestic cone-shaped mountains. Bright-yellow banana stalls filled with every variety of the fruit lined the roads, and I couldn't help but smile at the sight of men squatting and cutting grass along the roadside, presumably preparing animal feed. Women clad in hijabs tended to goats, and shops that sold hijabs exclusively caught my eye, making me consider picking one up. Children flew kites in the spirit of play, while older men marketed woven baskets. Nearby, women were drying small fish on wooden tables, while others navigated motorbikes piled high with wood. This tapestry of daily life unfolded as the muezzins' calls echoed through the air, and I couldn't help but think their sound systems could use a little improvement.

As the sun set, I arrived in Situbondo and found a budget-friendly place to rest my head. Taking the low price, I couldn't complain about the bathroom, which was certainly an interesting affair. What's more, the beds facing the bathroom instead of the door added a quirky touch to my stay. Street food vendors lined the streets, offering delicious nibbles, but finding a cold beer proved more challenging. I finally bought one at Indomaret, only to discover it was a Bintang Zero, but hey, cheers to new experiences!







Coastal Cycling: Probolinggo and Local Flavours

"Hello, Mister!" is the cheerful greeting I heard echoing throughout Indonesia, accompanied by countless thumbs-ups from motorbikes zipping by. I couldn't help but smile as I realized I must have been quite the spectacle—a Western woman on a bicycle seemed to be a rarity here.

As I pedalled along the stunning coastal route, the day unfolded like a postcard, with the gentle breeze making my ride both easy and exhilarating. My path was dotted with warungs (little restaurants), all offering mouthwatering Ikan Bakar (grilled fish). With every stop, my Bahasa Indonesia improved gradually. It's surprisingly straightforward when you get the hang of key terms—nasi for rice, mie for noodles, goreng for fried, bakar for grilled, ayam for chicken, and ikan for fish. I even cracked the code to introduce myself as being from Afrika Selatan and learned that a bicycle is called a sepeda.

Beyond the enticing restaurants, I noticed numerous fish and rice drying under the sun, a testament to Indonesia's love for its staple foods.

As I continued my journey, I couldn't help but notice the many mosques dotting the landscape, reflecting the nearly 90% predominantly Muslim population. Often, these mosques were collecting donations from passing vehicles, causing the already narrow roads to feel even more constricted. Phew, I forgot how challenging cycling in Indonesia could be.



Eventually, I rolled into Probolinggo, signalling the end of another delightful day on the bike. With Mount Bromo beckoning and a growing pile of laundry demanding attention, I called it a day and looked forward to whatever adventures tomorrow might bring!





Mount Bromo: Volcanic Landscapes and Mountain Mystique

In the morning, I packed my belongings and bid farewell to Probolinggo. However, as I approached the turn-off to Mt. Bromo, I spontaneously decided to take a short detour to this iconic site. Instead of tackling the steep mountain on my bicycle, I opted for a more comfortable ride and hailed a motorbike taxi to whisk me to the summit.

Having visited Mt. Bromo seven years earlier, I was eager to see if it would still captivate me. The ascent was thrilling, and even though my photography skills fell short this time around, I couldn't dismiss the breathtaking view awaiting me at the top. The earlier images I captured felt like masterpieces compared to today's snaps, but the sheer magnificence of the landscape made it all worthwhile.

As I stepped into the expansive caldera, the fume-belching cone of Mt. Bromo stared me right in the face. I could hear the volcano's ominous hisses and splatters even from a distance. A brief trek across the sandy terrain led to the crater's edge, where one could peer into the belly of the beast. The splattering and roaring sounds mingled with plumes of steam and smoke that rose dramatically, creating an otherworldly atmosphere. Strolling along the rim, with smoke swirling up around me, I felt like I had entered another realm entirely.



The return trip led past lush vegetable plantations nestled on steep hillsides, and I marvelled at how these crops thrived in such rugged terrain. The mountains exuded a unique charm, distinct from that of the lowlands. Up here, the air was cooler, wrapped in moisture and mist. Farmers bundled in blankets perched on horseback, inspected their lands, reminding me of scenes from African landscapes. Wooden homes perched precariously on stilts clinging to the mountainside, and cheerful, red-cheeked children skipped joyfully on their way to school.

Once back at my accommodation, the tantalising aroma of bakso lured me in, and I treated myself to a satisfying bowl before cycling into town to gather some much-needed supplies.





Urban Chaos: Surabaya's Sights and Sounds

The terrible road and horrible traffic made a slow, soot-laden, exhaust-inhaling ride to Surabaya. Yet, despite the holdups and the sooty chaos, the day unfolded beautifully. I might not have experienced anything monumental, but the everyday life surrounding me was utterly captivating. Mobile carts adorned with stunning woven crafts caught my eye. Gangs of schoolgirls zipped by on scooters, their laughter filling the air as they headed to class. Mothers gracefully manoeuvred their motorbikes, one hand on the handlebars and the other cradling a tiny, near-newborn baby—a sight both charming and heartwarming.

Bicycle rickshaws whisked hijab-clad pre-schoolers to and from school, while toothless men leisurely chewed on nasi goreng as the world buzzed around them. In Indonesia, eateries are plentiful, and the route was lined with warungs dishing out the familiar flavours of nasi goreng, mee goreng, and ayam. The pungent aroma of durian wafted through the air, teasing my senses as I rode past stands where vendors blinked in surprise at the sight of a foreigner on two wheels. “Hello, Mister” chimed a friendly voice from a vendor selling massive jackfruit, making the moments feel quintessentially Indonesian.

As I neared Surabaya, the skies opened, unleashing a torrential downpour that transformed the ride into a nerve-wracking cycle into Indonesia's second-largest city. However, the relief I felt upon finally reaching this sprawling city was palpable, though finding budget accommodation amidst the pouring rain was a challenge in its own.







Exploring Surabaya: Arab Quarter and Chinatown

Once in Surabaya, I thought it was worth exploring, especially since getting there was such a mission. My first destination was the Qubah, the city's enchanting Arab quarter that twists and turns around the historic Mesjid Ampel Mosque. This mosque isn't just an architectural marvel; it's a significant site where the revered Sunan Ampel, a key figure in spreading Islam to Java, is believed to be buried. At the back of the mosque, devotees gather to offer rose petals and chant prayers near the sacred grave—a scene that resonates with deep spirituality.

As I ventured into the vibrant souk that surrounds the mosque, I found myself surrounded by an array of typical Arab treasures. From juicy dates and colourful fezzes to savoury samosas and fragrant perfumes, the market buzzed with life and energy. I quickly realised that this wasn't a touristy market, and I stood out like a sore thumb as I wandered the narrow, bustling alleys with my camera in hand.

The area around the market was equally fascinating. Curious locals peeked through the curtains of their homes, perhaps pondering what a foreigner was doing in their neck of the woods. The cheerful shouts of "Photo, photo!" rang around me as playful kids made the perfect subjects for spontaneous photography.



My exploration didn't stop there as I eagerly made my way to Chinatown, which unfolded before me like a colourful tapestry. The vibrant streets were alive with the sights and sounds of beautiful temples, dazzling dragon decorations, and an array of tantalising food stalls. Unfortunately, the fish market had closed by the time I arrived, but the atmosphere was still electric. Vendors enthusiastically hawked everything from fresh meat to mouth-watering fruits and vegetables, creating a lively cacophony of voices. Outside, bicycle rickshaws lined the streets, ready to whisk shoppers home, adding to the bustling charm of the market.

Surabaya was a feast for the senses. Every corner revealed a new layer of its vibrant culture, making my exploration all the more rewarding.









Escaping the City: Bojonegoro's Open Roads

The ride out of Surabaya was a nerve-wracking ride that I won't soon forget. I kicked things off with an unexpected detour through the hectic streets of the city. My original plan was to hop onto a toll road, but with bicycles banned, I had to navigate through the hustle and bustle instead. As I pedalled alongside men clad in shalwar kameez and fezzes, I couldn't help but chuckle at the delightful absurdity of it all.

After what felt like an eternity—almost two hours—I finally escaped the city's frenetic energy. It's hard to imagine an "open road" in Indonesia, but at least I was away from the chaos. Even so, the journey was anything but serene. I mostly kept my camera tucked away, focusing intently on dodging potholes and maintaining my balance while weaving through the madness.

Once I reached the outskirts, however, the atmosphere shifted. The ride became blissfully relaxed, and I savoured the surroundings as the day sped by. I couldn't resist the temptation to explore a minor route, drawn in by the promise of stunning vistas. But after a bumpy ride that rattled my bones, I promptly rejoined the main road, realising that comfort sometimes trumps beauty.

Around midday, a drama unfolded when a truck toppled over, spilling its cargo of rice across the highway. The sight of grains scattering led to a massive traffic jam, an endless line of weary lorries stretching for miles. In that moment, I felt a surge of relief—I was on my bicycle, free from the gridlock. A crew of self-appointed traffic wardens skilfully managed the scene, and their efforts made me appreciate the ride all the more. What a day it was!



Rural Java: Rice Paddies and Woodcraft Wonders enroute to Sragen

The day dawned without a hint of sleep in between the cocks crowing and the muezzins calling the faithful to prayer—a lively soundtrack that set the stage for what lay ahead. Much to my surprise, the pace of the day turned out to be slower than I had anticipated. As I embarked on my journey, I was greeted by the sight of verdant rice paddies glowing in the morning light, interspersed with the striking silhouettes of mosques. However, as I ventured further, the road deteriorated into a bumpy, rickety path that turned my ride into a relentless shake-and-rattle affair.

I couldn't help but chuckle at the reactions of nearly every motorbike rider zooming past; heads turned, eyebrows raised, taking in the sight of me wobbling along, resembling a cross between a circus performer and a free-spirited yogi clad in yoga pants and a flowing skirt. Occasional flashes of light caught my eye as yet another mobile phone emerged from a car window, capturing the spectacle. As the centre of attention, I felt a curious mix of humour and fatigue wash over me—was this what other cycle tourers felt, I wondered?

As midday approached, the sun cranked up the heat, and the terrain took a turn for the hilly, challenging my determination. I pressed on, cruising along a charming country lane winding through rural landscapes, where woodcraft seemed to breathe life into the local economy. The roadsides were adorned with vibrant stands showcasing a delightful array of wooden creations—from elegant furniture to intricate statues, and even some skulls that were hard to look away from.



Just as the clouds gathered and the first raindrops threatened to fall, serendipity guided me to the Graha Hotel in Sragen. It was a welcome sight, offering cozy economy fan rooms on the ground floor, with the added luxury of wheeling my bike right inside. What a relief! I couldn't help but smile as I finally settled in, knowing I had narrowly escaped the impending downpour.









Rainy Detour: Surakarta's Old Town

The traffic was already hectic when I got going, but it didn't take long before lush rice fields and the silhouettes of mosques surrounded me. Initially, I had no plans to veer into Solo, but the allure of its attractions proved irresistible. After securing a room, I eagerly set out to uncover the charm of the old town.

Just as I began my exploration, dark clouds rolled in, and the skies opened up in a torrential downpour. I thought about waiting it out, but with no umbrella and the rain showing no signs of letting up, I flagged down a bicycle rickshaw.

Sadly, the rain put a damper on my sightseeing plans, forcing me to venture out just once, for a steaming bowl of soup and to snag a bright plastic raincoat to shield me from the deluge. Back at my accommodation, I did the laundry, crossing my fingers for it to be dry by morning. Fortunately, my laptop chimed to life, allowing me to dive into organising my photos—a small victory amid the storm.











Prambanan Temple: Spiritual Heritage and Local Rituals

I couldn't fall asleep; maybe the wallpaper was too busy, or perhaps because I'd practically done nothing the previous day. I fell asleep around 3 a.m. Shortly afterwards, however, the muezzin started calling, and as one of the residents in the alley passed away during the night, funeral procedures began at around 6 a.m.

Eventually, I got up as there was no point in trying to sleep. The room rate included breakfast, and what a feast. I was served rice topped with a tofu stew, which was delicious and an all-vegetarian affair.

By the time I got underway, the entire lane was covered to give shelter from the threatening rain. Chairs were put out, and the body lay covered for people to say their last goodbyes. Speakers blasted verses from the Quran for the entire neighbourhood to hear. In a way, it was quite lovely, as friends and family randomly popped in.

During the day, I spotted guys loading flour and thought they could make interesting pictures with their flour-covered faces. But they spotted me and cleaned their faces before emerging from the shed on the next round. How sweet!

I cycled the short distance to the Prambanan temple. The temple complex is a UNESCO World Heritage Site comprising beautiful Hindu temples dating to the ninth century. The temple is dedicated to Shiva and was constructed by the king of the ancient Mataram Kingdom in 856 AD.



I discovered nearby digs and then set off on foot to explore the complex. Unfortunately, the weather didn't cooperate (photography-wise). Still, the temples are set in a beautiful garden, and strolling around is a pleasure.









Journey to Borobudur: Buddhist Marvels and Country Lanes

After a brief but delightful day of cycling, I found myself on the way to the iconic Borobudur, one of the most significant Buddhist sites in the world. This majestic temple, crafted from two million stone blocks into an asymmetrical stupa, stands tall as a testament to Indonesia's architectural wonders. They say that when viewed from above, it resembles an immense three-dimensional tantric mandala, a sight that must be breathtaking. But first things first—I needed to make my way there.

Peddalling along charming country lanes, I passed through the tiniest of settlements, soaking in the enchanting scenery. In the distance loomed the iconic smoking cone of Gunung Merapi, a stunning backdrop to my ride. I couldn't help but smile as waves from cheerful schoolchildren brightened my path. Yet, I felt a pang of sympathy for those little ones, bundled up as if they were braving the Arctic chill rather than enjoying the warmth of the equator. It seemed almost ironic that people in Indonesia suffer from a vitamin D deficiency, and I wondered how the children could truly enjoy their playtime while dressed so heavily.

I soon reached the Pondok Tinggal Hotel, where I planned to rest for the night. At first glance, the price seemed a bit steep, but the warm-hearted staff quickly offered me a generous discount, making my decision easier. The hotel, a charming bamboo-and-timber structure, was surrounded by a lush courtyard garden that felt like a serene oasis.

Instead of rushing to the temple that evening, I decided to bide my time and plan my visit for six the next morning. As the skies darkened and rain began to fall, I knew my decision was wise. Visiting the temple would have to wait, but the magic of Borobudur was just starting to unfold.







Borobudur: Art, Culture, and Ancient Stones

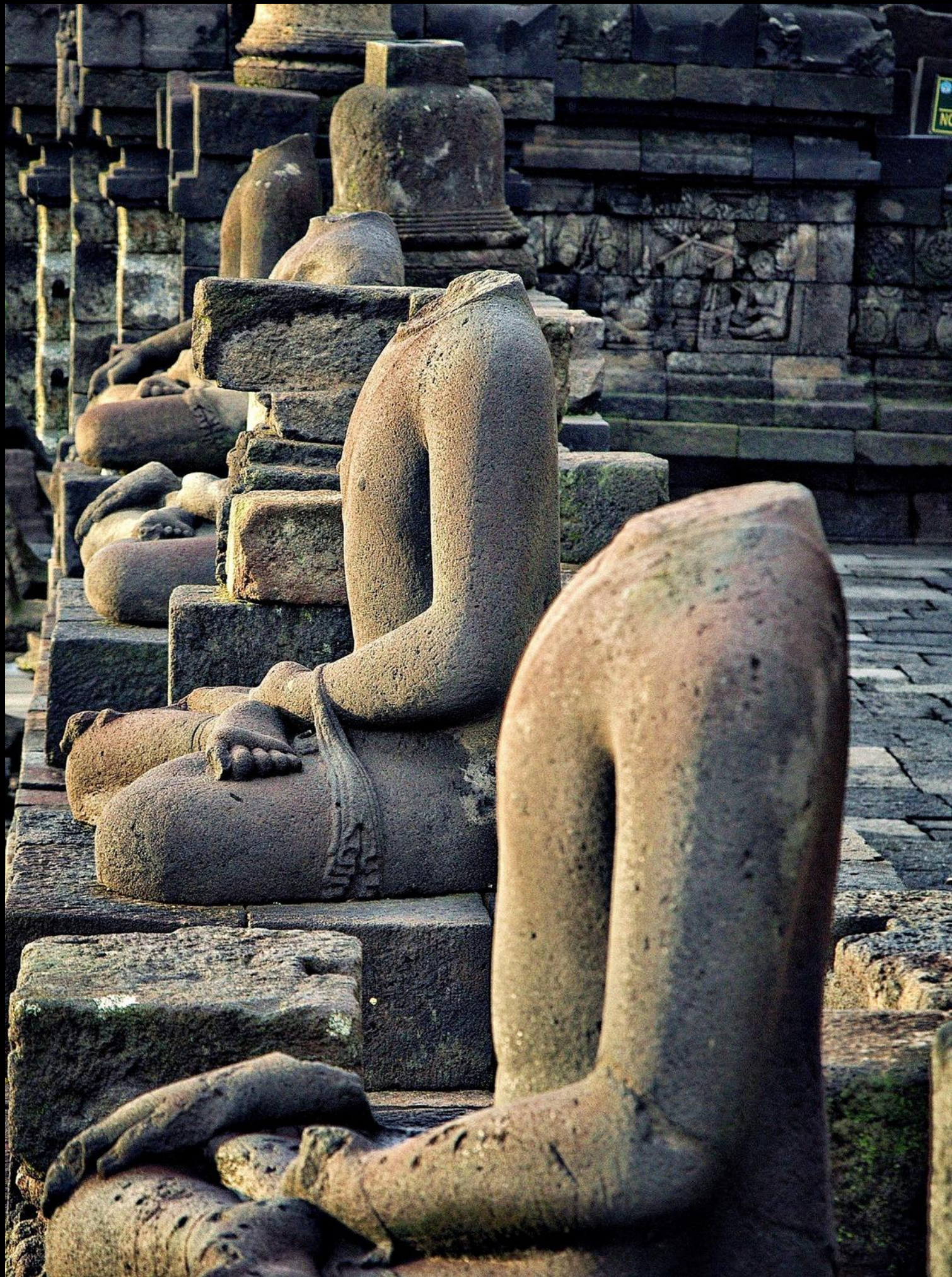
Art students had taken over nearly the entire hotel, turning it into a vibrant hub of creativity and energy. As night fell, we were treated to a fascinating cultural show in the courtyard that kept us entertained until 2 a.m.! Yet, I found myself waking at 5 a.m. and making my way to the temple by 6.

The dawn light was promising, even if Saturday brought half of Indonesia along with me to witness the enchanting Borobudur. Clearly, I wasn't the only one drawn to this UNESCO World Heritage site! I forked out the steep \$20 entrance fee for foreigners, but it was a small price for a glimpse into history.

This magnificent temple, believed to have begun construction around 750 AD, gracefully hugs a small hill. Interestingly, during renovations, archaeologists uncovered that this hill was not a natural formation as previously thought, but rather an artificial creation. The temple itself was abandoned around the twelfth century, likely due to volcanic eruptions. It was British explorer, Sir Stamford Raffles who stumbled upon this hidden gem in 1814, revealing the temple from beneath layers of volcanic ash.

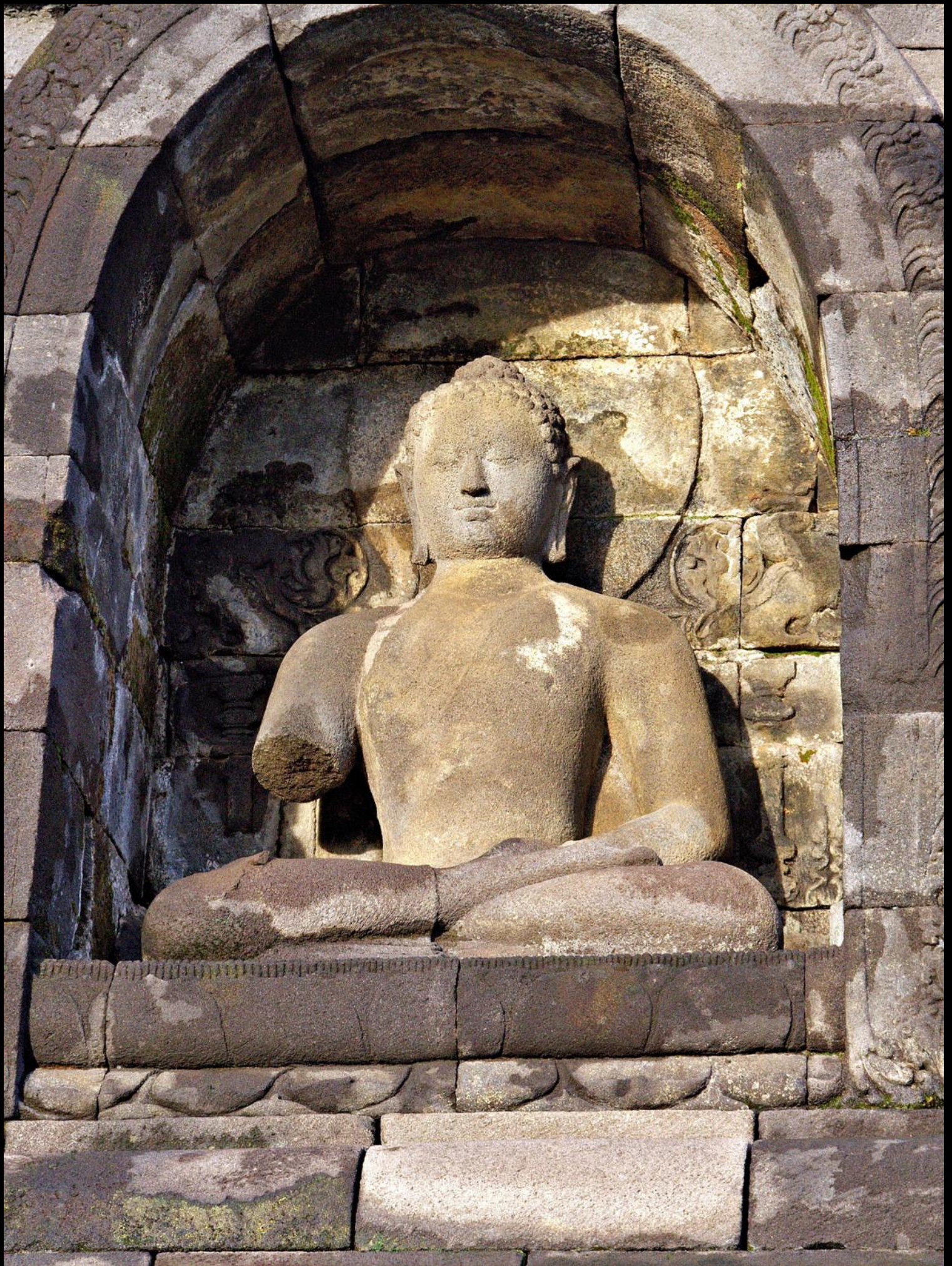
As the day turned into evening, the art students packed up and headed home, making way for a lively car club that brought its own brand of merriment. I was graciously invited to join the festivities, where a band played lively tunes and a tempting spread of food and drinks awaited.











Later, a mesmerising Javanese puppet show unfolded in the foyer, starring the exquisite Wayang Kulit shadow puppets. These intricate performances can stretch on throughout the night, and it's not unusual for the audience and musicians alike to drift off into slumber. The puppets, crafted from dried buffalo skin and horns, come to life in the hands of master puppeteers wielding thin sticks.

Though I didn't stay too long due to the language barrier and the creeping sensation of sleepiness, the atmosphere felt inviting enough that no one would have minded if I had dozed off.





Rainy Rides: Kebumen's Hills and History

I took off in a drizzle that continued throughout the day. At first, a steep climb led out of Borobudur, followed by an excellent descent. I flew downhill at breakneck speed, watching for the numerous potholes. I sailed past rice fields, raging streams, terracotta-tiled-roof houses, and friendly Indonesians.

History shaped the language of this country. The Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and British all made their mark in Indonesia, and each left a few words. Words like "solo," "mas," "handuk," and "kantor pos" are clearly borrowed from other languages. I thought it interesting they used the word "handuk" instead of "towel." Obviously, this word comes from the Dutch.

I reached Kebumen early, but since I was soaked, I called it quits.





Forts and Caves: Karanganyar Indah's Hidden Stories

Indonesia is a breathtaking tapestry of natural beauty, and I am in awe of its stunning landscapes every single day. Shortly after getting underway, I spotted a sign for Benteng Van Der Wijck—an impressive Dutch fort dating back to the 1800s. I couldn't resist the call of history!

As I continued my journey, another sign caught my eye, directing me towards mysterious caves. Naturally, I had to explore! Upon entering, I discovered a surreal world with four underground springs believed to grant agelessness—imagine the stories those waters could tell. I should have scooped up some water! Inside the cave, I was surrounded by 32 statues, each narrating the captivating legend of Raden Kamandaka, a crown prince who was once imprisoned here. The atmosphere was both eerie and enchanting.

After leaving the cave, I took the scenic coastal route to Cilacap, but fate had other plans: the road didn't lead through Pangandaran as I'd hoped. Just as the weather turned ominous, an epic clap of thunder echoed, and suddenly, the sky unleashed a torrential downpour. My path transformed into a river but with my trusty plastic raincoat as armour, I pressed on, regardless.

I finally stumbled upon a roadside hotel around 5 p.m., sighed in relief, and was happy to call it a day.











Mountain Roads: Banjar's Crocodile Estuary and Fruit Stalls

Accompanied by morning traffic, I slowly snaked out of the village, trying to avoid potholes. The rest of the day consisted of a hilly ride in Central Java. My route took me over the mountains toward Merak, where I planned to catch the ferry to the island of Sumatra. However, the poor road made the journey extremely slow, and, in the end, I realised I could do nothing but relax, slow down, and follow the traffic. It remained a frustrating day, as my gears kept slipping, making the inclines even more challenging. However, the stunning views made up for the bad roads and the slipping gears.

I passed a sign stating, "Watch Out—Crocodile Estuary," and wondered how many people were taken before it warranted a sign. I stopped at colourful fruit stalls and was tempted to buy a whole lot but realised I couldn't eat that much. Thus, I simply took a picture. The Indonesians are super-friendly and keen for you to take photos, making photography easy.

By 3 p.m., the weather came in, and by the time it reached Banjar, it started raining. I didn't feel like cycling in the rain, so I checked into the first available hotel. Maybe I was overly keen, as the place was terrible and the area devoid of any facilities. Moreover, I didn't think I would get breakfast in the morning.







Repairs and Kindness: Tasikmalaya's Scenic Route

When travelling by bicycle, no two days are ever the same. This morning, I got on my bike and pedalled the couple of kilometres into Banjar, on the hunt for a place to buy internet time. Since most shops were still closed, I decided to continue along Route 3. That's when I stumbled upon an Indomaret mini-mart—an absolute treasure trove that seemed to have everything I could possibly need (well, everything except beer, but hey, it's all good!).

Sipping on a steaming cup of coffee, I pulled out my map, eager to find a local bicycle shop. To my delight, I discovered Ikey bike store. The moment I rolled in, I was greeted with the warmest smiles. These folks didn't just adjust my derailleur; they went above and beyond, replacing my chain too! I can't express how relieved and happy I was—nothing ruins a ride faster than slipping gears, especially when you're climbing uphill.

I had initially planned to reach Bandung, but reality hit me when I realised it was a hefty 170 kilometres away! Jatnika from the bike shop suggested taking the scenic secondary road, and what a stroke of luck that was. The smooth pavement felt like a ribbon beneath my wheels, and the tranquillity of the route allowed me to soak in the beauty around me.

Along the way, I encountered hidden gems—like talented knife makers showcasing stunning handmade blades and intricate sheaths in an array of styles. I even came across a bandy-legged man scavenging for recyclables, and lively salak fruit stalls where cheerful sellers called out "Mister, Mister!" enticing me to taste their sweet offerings.



Just when I thought the day couldn't get any better, I paused to check my map near Tasikmalaya. Out of nowhere, two fellow cyclists stopped to chat. They offered their help and ended up escorting me to a comfortable hotel. I couldn't have asked for kinder companions on my journey. Thanks, guys—you made my day!





By Train and Bus: Jakarta to Merak and Beyond

I realised that if I wanted to meet Janice in Kuala Lumpur, I had to start moving towards Dumai, more than 1,500 kilometres away. I thus cycled to the train station and bought a train ticket for Jakarta as I reasoned it would be easier to find onward transport from there.

The train trip, albeit long, was comfortable, and we arrived in Jakarta at around six. Unfortunately, my bicycle wasn't on the same train, and I was told to collect it in the morning. Consequently, I grabbed a motorbike taxi to Hostel 35.

The next day, I returned to the parcel office using an Uber moto. Thank goodness, the bicycle was there, and I cycled to the harbour to check if the Pelni ferry had already sailed, but I was too late, and the ferry was long gone. My next option was to catch the Dumai-Melaka ferry, so I cycled to the bus terminal about 15 kilometres away, where I finally boarded a bus to Merak, the most western point in Java, from where ferries sailed for Sumatra. It was past nine on arriving at the ferry, and it was best to settle for a losmen (basic hotel).



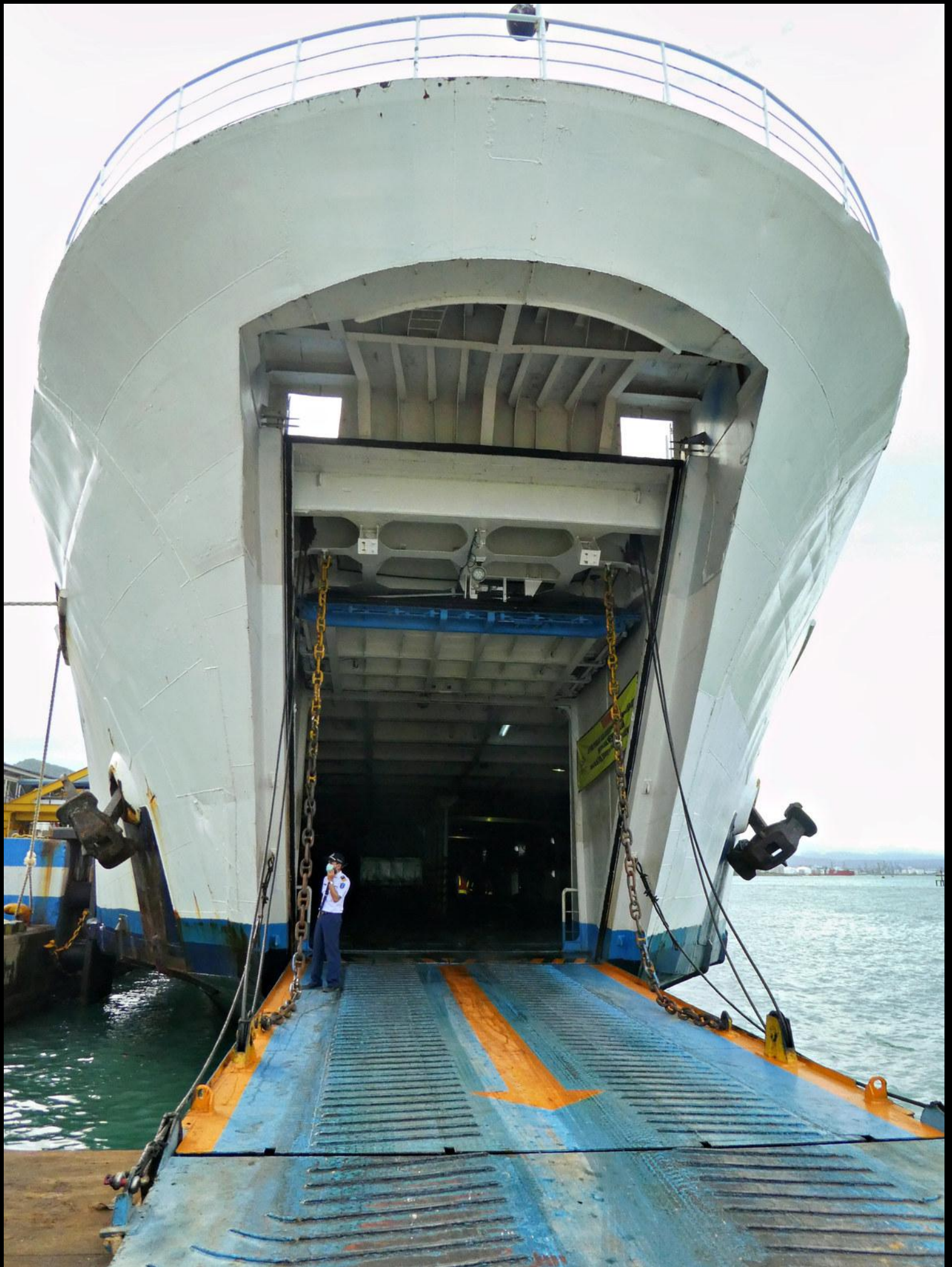
Sumatra Bound: Long Bus Rides

The day began with a brisk bike ride to the harbour, where a colossal car ferry awaited, ready to whisk us away to the island of Sumatra. This ferry, a lifeline that navigated the waves throughout the day, may not have been as direct as the Bali–Java ferry, but it offered a swift passage to Sumatra.

Upon arrival, I quickly learned that Sumatra's public transport system was somewhat lacking, especially for long-distance journeys. After a bit of a search, I finally found a bus that would take my bicycle and me to Dumai. I suspected I had been overcharged, but considering the expanse of 1,400 kilometres ahead of us, I still deemed it a fair deal.

The bus itself was an older model, without air conditioning, and rattled along the uneven roads of the equator, offering a quite bumpy ride. Honestly, I couldn't fathom how seasoned backpackers managed such travels! The bus driver was a true trooper, taking hardly any breaks. We paused only around 9 p.m. for a quick bite, and after that, we settled in for a long, uncomfortable night.

At around 7 a.m., we stopped for breakfast and kept powering on until supper. As someone who prefers to stay hydrated, I made sure to drink my usual amount of water, even though it meant asking the bus driver for pit stops. Each time I made the request, it seemed like the entire bus joined in, hopping off for their own restroom breaks. It turned out that was the secret to survival on these long bus rides!



To keep myself entertained, I turned to the internet. Thankfully, I had three power banks stashed in my bag, which kept my devices alive throughout the ordeal. I quickly realised that this bus ride wasn't going to end that day, so we braced ourselves for yet another night on those unyielding, hard seats.

The next morning, we finally hit the Dumai-Medan junction, where I hopped off to tackle the final leg of my journey—a pleasant 50-kilometre cycle into Dumai. Despite the fatigue, there was something exhilarating about cycling that familiar stretch once again. Memories flooded back from seven years prior when I had traversed the same path but in the opposite direction. Surprisingly, everything looked just as I remembered—the potholed roads, sprawling oil palm plantations, glistening oil pipelines, and quaint houses perched on stilts selling ripe pineapples.

Upon arriving in Dumai, I checked the ferry schedule only to find that the boats had already departed. I was left with two choices: the 9:30 ferry to Malaka, Malaysia, or the 11:00 ferry to Port Dickson. There was a third option for Port Klang that sailed only on specific days. Once I got my plans sorted, I treated myself to a room at the City Hotel for \$20—my little indulgence for having spent two nights on a bus! After checking in, I felt a wave of relief wash over me as I scrubbed off the travel grime, washed my hair, and handed over my laundry, ready for the next leg of my journey.











Crossing to Malaysia: Stormy Seas and New Horizons

After indulging in a delightful Indonesian breakfast, I loaded my bike and pedalled the short distance to the ferry ticket office. While it was way too early, I checked in and awaited the departure of the Port Dickson ferry at eleven.

However, as we set sail, the weather decided to take a turn for the worse, transforming our journey across the Straits of Malacca into a rollercoaster ride. The ferry rocked and rolled, earning its nickname “Pitch & Puke” as the crew handed out seasick bags left and right.

We finally anchored in Malaysia at three p.m., although the time difference pushed it to four p.m. As I made my way toward Kuala Lumpur, the stormy clouds cast a gloomy veil over the landscape, reducing visibility. But just when I thought my day couldn’t get any more unpredictable, I spotted the Grandpa Hotel. It beckoned to me like a cosy haven, and I couldn’t resist the lure of a warm, dry place to rest. Realistically, I wasn’t going to make it to Peter’s place that day anyway, and staying here felt just as good. What a day it had been!



Epilogue

As the ferry rocked its way across the Straits of Malacca and I finally set foot in Malaysia, the whirlwind of the past 29 days settled into memory. Indonesia had revealed itself in layers: through rain-soaked rice fields, bustling city streets, and the warmth of strangers. The journey was not always easy—there were days of exhaustion, unexpected detours, and relentless weather—but each challenge became a story, each encounter a lesson. Looking back, I realise that the true reward was not the distance covered, but the richness of experience gained. The road may end, but the spirit of adventure endures, ready for the next horizon.



About This Blog

Welcome to my travel blog, where I take you along on our cycle ride through the breathtaking landscapes of Indonesia, all the way to Malaysia! My goal? To meet up with my friend Janice in Kuala Lumpur to embark on a bicycle ride to Bangkok. Buckle up; the roads we're about to explore are as diverse as they are beautiful, and while the route I've chosen might not be the most direct, it's certainly packed with unforgettable experiences!

Distance: A Journey Beyond Kilometres

Now, let's talk about the distances. Don't let the numbers fool you! The daily kilometres recorded in this blog aren't always the straightest paths between two points. I tend to take detours—sometimes for the scenery, other times for that impromptu roadside café that's just too tempting to pass up. Rest assured, though, my trusty odometer keeps things accurate, even if my sense of adventure leads me astray!

Timing: A Flashback to January-February 2017

Travelling through Indonesia in January and February 2017 was a special experience. Keep in mind that things may have changed since then. Roads might be smoother, more developed, or even a bit worse for wear. Places where I lay my head may have transformed entirely—some upgraded, some gone. The hills? They sure felt steep back then, but who knows what they look like now!

Safety First: Travel Insurance Matters

Before you set off on your own adventures, don't forget the importance of travel insurance. It's essential to safeguard against theft, loss, and medical emergencies. Just a heads-up: some policies exclude "dangerous activities." While cycling doesn't fall into that category for me, make sure to read the fine print. Better safe than sorry!

Gear Up: Dress for Comfort and Adventure

Most of our days revolved around the saddle, so having quality, padded cycling shorts is a must! Personally, I cycle in comfy sandals, but you can opt for whatever feels right on your feet. In the tropical heat, heavy clothing isn't necessary—unless you find yourself in higher-elevation spots, that is! Don't forget your personal essentials: insect repellent and anti-chafe cream can truly be game-changers. And trust me, a cycling helmet is a non-negotiable!

The Bike: Your Trusty Companionship

Choosing the right bike is tricky but oh-so-important! I ride a mountain bike with a sturdy Merida frame, Shimano Deore components, Alex wheel rims, and trusty Schwalbe tyres. For my gear, Tubus bicycle racks and Ortlieb panniers are my go-to. A bit pricey? Yes, but totally worth it for the peace of mind they bring. And don't forget to brush up on how to fix a punctured tube—it's a skill that will serve you well! A phone holder on the handlebars is fantastic for navigation; I rely on Organic Maps and Google Maps to find my way. Plus, a handlebar bag is perfect for keeping your camera and other essentials handy for those spontaneous moments!

Dive Deeper: Recommended Reading

If you're looking to enrich your journey, I highly recommend the Lonely Planet e-book. It's budget-friendly and serves as a fantastic companion as you plot your own adventures!

So, are you ready to pedal into the unknown with me? Let's go!



Exploring Indonesia: A Vibrant Archipelago of Wonders

Capital City: The Heart of the Nation

Welcome to Jakarta, affectionately known as the “Big Durian”! This bustling megacity is home to over 10 million people and sits at the crossroads of the world's most populous island. While Jakarta dazzles with its vibrant culture and energy, navigating its notorious gridlocked traffic can be quite the adventure—especially for cyclists!

Currency: The Rupiah

When it comes to shopping or dining out in Indonesia, you'll use the Indonesian rupiah (IDR)! Managed by the Bank of Indonesia, this colourful currency reflects the nation's rich cultural tapestry. Whether you're buying street food or handcrafted souvenirs, get ready to embrace the colourful world of Rp.

Language: A Melodic Mix

Bahasa Indonesia serves as the national language and is the glue that binds diverse cultures. Taught in schools and prominent in media, it bridges communication among over 300 ethnic groups. While Javanese and Sundanese reign as the most commonly spoken dialects, you might also hear Chinese dialects like Hokkien and Teochew in bustling communities. And don't worry—while English isn't widespread, you'll find enough speakers in major cities and tourist spots to help you navigate your adventures.

Religion: A Tapestry of Beliefs

In Indonesia, the predominant faith is Islam, with approximately 87.18% of the population identifying as Muslim. This diverse nation also embraces other religions, including Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, creating a rich tapestry of cultural and spiritual practices that you can experience firsthand.

Location and Size: A Geographical Marvel

Spanning 1,919,440 sq km, Indonesia boasts five major islands and 13,677 smaller islands, making it one of the largest archipelagos in the world. It's an intricate arc of beauty nestled between Asia and Australia. From the lush landscapes of Sumatra and Java to the divine shores of Borneo, Sulawesi, and Irian Jaya, adventure awaits at every turn. Bordered by the majestic oceans, this nation showcases breathtaking sunsets and vibrant marine life.

Population: The People of Indonesia

With a staggering population of 267 million, Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world. Over half of the population lives on the island of Java, where the buzz of life is palpable, and every corner holds new experiences waiting to be discovered.

Internet Coverage: Connection in Paradise

For those looking to share their adventures or stay connected, Indonesia offers reliable internet services, especially in urban areas. So go ahead—snap those photos, share your experiences, and connect with the world as you explore this diverse and captivating nation!

Embrace the colourful spirit of Indonesia and immerse yourself in its diverse cultures, stunning landscapes, and warm-hearted people!



About the Author

Hailing from the vibrant city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a path that would lead her to become the first woman to complete the entire route from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.









**The beauty of living on a bicycle is the uncertainty of what the day holds,
who you'll meet, or where you'll end up.**



