

Old Batavia

Notorious Dutch colonial capital of Jakarta waits for the future

By Ron Verzuh

Rohindra parked the tourist bus near the town hall of Old Batavia, the Dutch colonial capital of Jakarta. I was the lone tourist on the bus, a sign of the bad economic times that have led Indonesia into growing political turmoil. “This is where they came to pay their taxes, go to jail for not paying their taxes and sometimes to be executed for not paying their taxes,” my guide Aris said as we stood in front of the hall on Execution Square.

To show me what it might have been like for a truant taxpayer in strict Dutch Batavia, Aris escorted me to a dungeon-like jail cell filled with ancient cannon balls stacked in triangles. Afterwards we wandered through the large-ceilinged Jakarta History Museum housed in the town hall. Most prominent was the antique furniture, much of it in mahogany and teak and in need of a serious dusting. It was another quiet sign that all was not well here.

Out in the square, vendors tried to hustle me by asking if I was Dutch. Having just seen the early Dutch legacy, I quickly flashed my Canadian flag pin. “No! Not Dutch. Canadian,” I corrected. Aris pointed to a large cannon across the square. It was surrounded by market stalls covered in blue plastic ground sheets. It rained on and off even though the sun beat down at 34 degrees C. The market was mostly trinkets, T-shirts, running shoes and other cheap clothing goods. No one was buying; another silent sign of this huge country’s troubles.

“That is the female cannon,” Aris said. I looked puzzled, not realizing that cannons had gender. “It is a symbol of fertility.” O.K. But I didn’t understand how this formidable weapon could symbolize anything but fear and destruction. No further explanation was forthcoming. “The other one, the male one, is across the city somewhere.” Right. And what does it symbolize, I wondered, love and affection?

I needed to stop at the Post Office on the other side of the square. When we entered

the old building, one of many examples of Dutch colonial architecture in Batavia, I noticed several large bowls of a white custard-like substance. “It is paste for the stamps,” Aris said smiling at my ignorance. “Sometimes the stamps do not have enough to stick properly.”

At this point, we parted ways so that I could have lunch in air-conditioned comfort at the Café Batavia next to the market. Aris could not afford to eat in this restored 1930s café cum jazz club, so politely refused to join me. I was one of only five diners in the teak-walled, high-ceilinged café. Visitors had been warned to stay off the streets at night during this period of unrest, so I wondered if business was any better at dinner.

An hour later we met outside in the sweaty heat of the square. I told several more street vendors that I wasn't Dutch, and we fought our way through endless traffic to the Wayang Museum across the street. It housed a large collection of puppets, puppet shows being an important part of Javanese society.

I asked him if he liked the puppet shows. They can be long, sometimes a whole day long, and terribly repetitive, with the same good and evil themes playing over and over. The shows originate from the epic Hindu tales, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. “It depends on the puppet master,” he said. “If he is good, he will add little jokes along the way. This is very funny. And the best ones can make each character sound very different.” It is a diversion that has brought Indonesians solace in other bad times. Maybe it will do so now.

Aris prefers the wayang kulit, the leather puppets played as shadows behind a screen, but he also enjoys the show featuring wayang klitik (flat wooden puppets) and wayang golek (wooden and cloth dolls).

The museum displayed puppets from China, Malaysia, India, Cambodia and all over Indonesia. “The best come from Java,” Aris said authoritatively when we came to one that was sent to the museum from France by none other than Francois Mitterrand.

When we rejoined Rohindra and drove out of Old Batavia, police were once again

herding vehicles into detours away from the corridors of bank towers and government offices. It had become almost a daily ritual since the November massacre of students.

A large demonstration was in progress and city centre was cordoned off around Merdeka (Freedom) Square. We were forced to drive back through the north end of the city. Along the way, some graffiti said “Pro-reformas”. A poster shouted “I want merdeka”. The flags of political parties (PDI, for example) and Mrs. Megawati Soekarnoputri’s photograph flew by the roadside. The Indonesian Observer reported on clashes between Megawati’s party and the ruling Golkar party. The big news was the attorney-general’s probe into corruption in former president Soeharto’s government.

The traffic seemed to get worse despite our extensive detour. As we inched forward, men and boys hammered on the van windows and shoved their cheap carvings of wooden ships and plastic stallions at me. Children held up newspapers, young men played a bar or two on an out-of-tune guitar for the driver who charitably gave them a coin worth nothing, motor scooters wove in and out of the dead traffic.

Everywhere people were waiting for the promised June 1999 elections when everyone hopes things will get better. They were waiting for the rupiah to gain some value. Waiting for the crisis to end. Waiting for life to get back to normal in frantic Jakarta.