

The wonders of Yogyakarta

A voyage to the ancient Hindu temple of Prambanan in Indonesia

By Ron Verzuh

Bpk Joko was concerned. He needed all the tourists he could get these days as student demonstrations and violent deaths in Jakarta had slowed his tour business to a pathetic trickle in the Javanese cultural capital of Yogyakarta. Still, he was starting to wear thin from our constant requests.

First it was the added time we took to give money to beggars outside the Kraton, the palace of the 10th Sultan of Yogyakarta, the once mighty capital of this 13,000-island Indonesian archipelago. Then it was Seno Batik, one of Yogya's (pronounced Jodgia) famed batik factories, where a young man named Widodo, Dodo for short, sold us a gorgeous bird of paradise wall hanging. This diversion meant Bpk Joko would now have to race through the back streets in his Toyota four-wheel-drive to get us to the ancient Hindu temple of Prambanan on schedule.

The ninth-century set of symmetrical stone structures about 17 km east of Yogya, a pretty city of about 300,000, is a must-see in a land full of must-sees and must-dos. The structures themselves attract the religious and the curious, but so does the classic Ramayana ballet performed at the site several months of the year.

We passed through streets bordered by white-washed walls of wood and clay, passed red-roofed shops and houses where people live out daily lives on a hope and a prayer. Both are focused right now on more tourists showing up after the June 1999 elections. Then maybe the devastated economy will surge back to normal.

On the main roads, handsome men and women buzz and weave through the traffic on scooters and motor bikes. The women more often than the men wear bandannas across their faces, as much to protect their makeup as to keep the constant cloud of fumes from clogging their lungs

They are often wearing neatly pressed business suits or long, flowing sarongs that look incongruous when they sit on the noisy, oily, two-wheeled pests. But then, perhaps these are signs that this Muslim country of 210 million is not as strict with its women.

As we sped along, old ladies trundled away on bicycles as old as they were. A mother and her daughter juggled packages piled high between them in a becak, the colourful trishaws crowding every street. Middle-aged men clicked their tongues at horses attached to frilly-fringed carriages called dokars.

Bpk Joko leaned impatiently on his horn through this colourful river of traffic, giving a few hundred rupiah to young men who came to his window at stop lights and strummed battered out-of-tune guitars for an instant.

His honking continued until we were at the entrance to the temple area. Now we would begin anew to fight our way through the human gauntlet of beggars and trinket vendors. Their faces pleaded with us to bargain for a cheap carving, a replica of a gamelan orchestra instrument or some faded postcards. The Asian monetary crisis had crushed the rupiah, valued at 3,700 to the U.S. dollar, a tourist bonanza but a trinket seller's nightmare.

"You must say 'no thank, no thank' and go quickly," Bpk Joko advised recalling the chaos at the Kraton. Of course, it didn't work and we lumbered heartlessly through the throngs meaning he would get home even later than expected.

Everyone has probably seen Prambanan but may not have known it. It is an impressive expanse of temples of varying sizes but similar shape. Each protects a statue of a Hindu god, explained our guide, Ismanto. "It is like ice, Is for short," he said. Ice pick, I thought, because he was so thin.

For 15,000 rupiah Is will show us every god in every massive stone tower and give us a full appreciation of all the reliefs and what they depict. Our favourite is Ganesa (Ganesh in India).

The half-man, half-elephant is the god of wisdom and intelligence, Is said. Brahma, Siva, and Wishnu are in the large central towers. These are the big gods, the main gods, while the others are housed in four lesser towers. Correction: Garuda, the eagle, symbol of the national airline, is not on public display right now.

Again we passed through the gauntlet as we finished our tour and thanked Is for his thoroughness, for showing us the cotton tree and for making the mimosa leaves, growing like clover at Prambanan, curl up at the touch of a human finger.

Bpk Joko motioned to us to hurry through the last of the beggars, but we broke down at the end and gave her 2,000 rupiah. We soon learned that he was in a hurry to get to lunch. Our driver was a man of strict habit and it was time to dine.

Earlier I had said that I wanted to try stewed jackfruit, a specialty called gudeg. Bpk Joko knew just the “restoran”, and 10 minutes later we were seated at Ayam Goreng Suharti, an Indonesian version of KFC.

I didn't expect to find any of the standard KFC chicken dishes on the menu. Nor did I expect what *was* on it. The “usus goreng Suharti” or fried bowel caught my eye and turned my stomach. Satu porsi hati rempelo sounded tasty but I wasn't in the mood for liver and gizzard. Nor was I about to snack on sambel goreng krecek (spicy cooked fried cow skin) or pete goreng (fried stinking bean).

Sated on ayam goreng (chicken cooked in coconut milk), gudeg and gado gado, Bpk Joko dipped his hands in a finger bowl and wiped them on some white rice. He was enjoying a cigarette when we proposed yet another change in the itinerary.

He checked his watch nervously, looking up at me with a pleading face. We were again merciless. After all, we were the only people on the tour in a city starved for tourists. Bpk Joko knew he had little choice.

-30-

Ron Verzuh is a Canadian writer and historian.