

The wonders of Yogyakarta

Visiting Buddha heaven at Borobudur, Indonesia

By Ron Verzuh

Bpk Joko was upset. The itinerary had been revised yet again, postponing the visit to the famed Buddhist temple at Borobudur in favour of a short stop at a silversmiths at Kota Gede, a suburb of Yogyakarta about five km from the centre of this arts and handicrafts capital of Central Java.

Kota Gede is famous for its silversmiths and Tom's Silver Manufacture is one of the better ones in Yogya. Here, all the silver items—the jewelry, table wear, intricate filigree sculptures—are made by hand. Not so many hands these days because of the economic crunch, but six or seven men and women torch, pound and twist the 925 silver into gorgeous shapes for bracelets, rings, picture frames, tea pots, and filigree images of trishaws, horse-drawn carriages and feathery birds of paradise.

Upstairs we found a whole floor of wayang or puppets for which Yodga is justly famous. Puppet shows are a major form of entertainment as well as religious instruction in Muslim Indonesia. The world of puppetry is fascinating and the quality of these puppets was high indeed, but Bkp Joko soon broke up the shopping spree with a concerned frown. He was hoping we would pass on Borobudur. It was a 40-km drive to this wonder of the world. But no such luck.

The road to the village of Borobudur and the ninth century temple took us past villages that made various metal, wood and stone objects for religious purposes, some practical and some decorative. One village was wholly devoted to the production and sale of salak and the snake-skinned fruit was piled high in pyramids everywhere along the roadside.

Once we neared the temple, the scene was luscious. All around this monument to Buddha, this massive perfect square of stone, the emerald forests shimmered in the late

afternoon sun. Above, the clouds danced in the blue sky as if preparing to make the ultimate sacrifice to the magnificent volcano growing out of the earth on the horizon.

All the tour books say Borobudur is an “absolute must” and they are right if only to see its paradisaal surroundings. We hadn’t told Bpk Joko, but we knew the best time to come would be late afternoon and we intended to savour every moment of sunlight we had left.

We would see all seven terraces with all their hundreds of stone reliefs of love, of war, of ship wrecks and of Buddha’s life. We would see the grey andesite stones change colours, light sand to dark grey to black, as the sun slowly set.

Once we fought our way through the ubiquitous vendors and beggars at the entrance, our guide, Udim, took us first to some of his favourite reliefs. A near-perfect image of an elephant, a battle scene, a sea voyage, stories of daily life all depicted in stone like some kind of Flintstones family album.

Then we headed for the top of the massive monument, past dozens of small perfectly formed stupas, the stone structures placed in concentric rings to protect each statue of Buddha. Only one Buddha, nearer the great stupa at the top which represents Nirvana, remains unprotected. It stands 40 metres from the base.

At the top Udim urged us to reach in through one of the openings of a stupa and touch Buddha. Some of the openings are diamond-shaped, others are squares. As Udim explained, the male must touch the Buddha’s toes, the female his fingers. If accomplished, you are granted eternal happiness.

Several teens were loitering around the stupas and I wondered if they were involved in the student demonstrations that had led to a tourism boycott of Indonesia. But they were local kids hanging out at the temple like North American youth would hang out at Macdonalds or the corner grocery.

It was 5:15 p.m. when Udim finished his tour and we heard bells telling us it was time

to leave just as they might have done a thousand years ago. The sun was starting to set and we got the full view of why the early Buddhists must have thought they had actually reached Nirvana here at Borobudur.

This “giant, three-dimensional tantric mandala,” as it has been called, is the most popular tourist attraction in the country. It has also been described as “a Buddhist vision of the cosmos in stone, starting in the everyday world and spiralling up to Nirvana—eternal nothingness, the Buddhist heaven.”

Back on earth, our walk back to Bpk Joko attracted every remaining postcard seller, beggar and hawker on the grounds. A group of Asian tourists wanted us to have our photos taken with them. How strange to be seen as a novelty. But then tourists are the rarest of sights in Indonesia these days.

As we fought off the trinket sellers with almost the same intensity one would try to escape an angry swarm of bees, I saw an old man shinnying down a tall palm. Two wooden tubes dangled from his waist to collect coconut juice and milk. He obviously had been doing it all his life.

We were exhausted but couldn't stop looking at the scene before us as Bpk Joko pulled out on to the road leading back to the village. The sunset was at its peak, painting the sky pink and blue grey. Mixed with the emerald green of the forests, these were colours an impressionist would kill for.

The volcano was out there stirring, a power, a fear, a thing of danger, beauty and magnificence. Bpk Joko slowed down for me to take photos of it then stopped so I could take a shot of a boy herding his geese home at dusk.

Our driver's patience was at its limit. He had stopped countless times and each time the image was more classic than the last: whole families on one motorbike, old ladies with wicker baskets strapped to their backs. It was endlessly entrancing.

By 6:30 p.m. Bpk Joko dropped us at the hotel, happy that the long day was done. We gave him a healthy 50,000-rupiah tip for his patience and he gave us his card again. “For next time,” he said. It was an indication of how truly tough times were for him to want to invite us to call him again next time.

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