

YOGYA IS HOT BUT MERAPI IS SMOKING

Central Java is rich in Hindu culture, arts and crafts of ancient eras and a landscape made rich by the forces of nature.



CENTRAL JAWA boasts rice fields, sugar cane plantations, cottage industries and the enchanting ancient monuments of Borobudur and Prambanan. It boasts a rich culture with a long history of arts, music and theatre, but nature occasionally unleashes forces of immense terror – destructive earthquakes and horrific volcanic activity.

Yogyakarta, Central Java's crown jewel, has much to offer and is easily reached by air from Singapore.

Jalan Malioboro is the best place to shop there, especially in the evening when the night market is on. Here, you can browse a wide selection of local goods like batik, peppers, bamboo, and silver and leather goods – plus the more

common T-shirts, dolls, hats and key-rings.

The nearby Taman Sari water castle, a late 17th-century rest house for a sultan of that time, has recently been restored and is worth a visit.

Black beauty

Parangtritis is a beach that lies some 45 minutes away. The sand is black with volcanic ash and the waves are high. You can enjoy a relaxing horse-and-cart ride along the beach.

Further up the coast, at Paranglumsu, you'll find a great seafood market where stallholders and chefs team up to cook what you buy and serve you at fresco. The chili crab, steamed prawns and barbecued squid taste wonderful.

Borobudur bedazzles

No trip to Central Java is complete without a visit to Borobudur, which contains the largest Buddhist stupas in the world. Built from stone in the 9th century, it has been damaged by earthquakes and looted by robbers from Mount Merapi.

It was rediscovered during the rule of Sir Stamford Raffles and fully restored 30 years ago. It is, by far, the most famous attraction in the region.

The impressive structure has nine terraces, with three circular levels containing small stupas that surround a larger one at the top. The statistics are mind-boggling:

Borobudur contains more than 500 Buddha statues and more than 2,300



relief carvings on 1,000m of wall, telling the story of the Buddha.

From the entrance to the grounds, there are four routes to the monument proper: 'first class' (on the back of an elephant), 'business class' (in a horse-drawn carriage), 'economy' (by miniature train), and for those who prefer 'budget class', a short walk.

Most tourists to Borobudur only visit

1 Mount Merapi is an active volcano that spews lava and ash from time to time.

2 Borobudur temple is the site of the largest Buddhist stupa in the world. **3** The Prambanan temple complex, which was built in the 9th century. **4** A pottery centre in Kilopoh.



the monument, which is a shame because there are other fascinating things to see and do, including visiting the wet market where a huge variety of fruits, vegetables and snacks are on sale.

If you have time, explore the countryside and check out cottage industries in neighbouring villages such as Kilopoh, which has developed into a pottery centre over the last 30 years with 100 families making earthenware pots. Simple clay articles are fired in wood furnaces for about an hour, and are sold regionally, says Supoyo, a local potter.

Prambanan inspires

Another 20km from Yogyakarta is the Prambanan temple complex, which is

set in pleasant grounds and was built in the 9th century and is the largest Hindu complex in Indonesia.

Its three main, tall and pointed temples are dedicated to the Hindu deities Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. They are flanked by smaller temples and a wide area of ruins. The reliefs on the temples depict the Ramayana legend.

Prambanan has not been spared by nature. As recently as 2006, it was badly damaged by a major earthquake and some parts are still being repaired.

Just 5km from Prambanan lies Kutus Raya Bolo. A steep, narrow, winding road leads to a spectacular, panoramic view of rice fields, Prambanan, Mount Merapi and Mount Sudooro (another



volcano). This former palace sprawls over a large area and has a grand double-gated entrance, but the site primarily consists of archaeological remains - goats, frogs and chickens enjoy the space. Enjoy an entertaining *Pudasa Pengging* (sika) (sika) performance in the evening.

Head in the clouds

The Dieng Plateau is too far off for a day trip from Yogyakarta. The road climbs to 2,000m above sea level, passing through lively countryside planted with coffee, tea, tobacco and handy vegetables like potatoes and carrots. The oldest Hindu temples of Arjuna are located here and they are often deserted.

Here, the thermal springs and boiling

mud with their characteristic sulphur smell are interesting. (But be warned - it gets very cold at night, there is often frost on the ground at dawn. Take a torchlit walk up a steep, narrow track on Gunung Sikanir to the viewpoint, and wait for sunrise, and watch as the clouds before slowly dissipate as the temperature rises.

Going Solo

A one-hour train ride from Yogyakarta takes you to Solo (Surakarta), long a business destination but now grabbing its share of tourists; not surprising as it is a clean, laid-back city that offers many cultural activities. It makes a good base for excursions.

Early in the morning, ride pillows on

an *ojek* (motorcycle taxi) to Mount Lawu and Candi Sukuh, a small, Javanese Hindu 10th-century temple.

There is no mistaking the fact that Candi Sukuh is dedicated to fertility and the importance and pleasure of sexuality. The carvings and sculptures here are exceedingly explicit - surprising, in conservative Central Java. Male and female genitalia are graphically portrayed across the grounds that lead to the Mayan-style pyramidal main temple.

- 1 Farmers harvesting rice in the Borobudur countryside. 2 A bustling market in Borobudur. 3 Traditional Javanese puppets on sale in Yogyakarta. 4 The Grand Mosque in Semarang has huge umbrellas. 5 A dance depicting tales from the Ramayana.



A dark and noisy factory where hammers beat and sparks fly lies 5km east of Solo. At Supoyo's gamelan factory, large bronze musical gongs are produced in a hot, dusty environment. The instruments are made using a technique that has barely changed in more than 100 years. Supoyo claims that neither technology nor machinery can improve the methods his craftsmen use, passed down via apprenticeships from one generation to the next.

Seen in Semarang

Semarang, Central Java's capital, is a three-hour drive from Solo. The Grand Mosque utilizes the most gigantic umbrellas you will ever see - they keep the faithful cool during prayers.

A day trip to Gedong Songo and Ambarawa is highly recommended. You need to ride a horse and climb a steep slope to reach Gedong Songo plateau and admire the spectacular landscape. It is the only practical way to see this group of nine small 18th-century Hindu temples, located on Mount Ungaran, 900m above sea level, they have been made out of volcanic stones. The temples themselves are rather simple structures but the peaceful setting and beautiful scenery are uplifting.

Central Java is a great place for a short break with its wonderful monuments and interesting cultural activities. There are lots to discover off the beaten path, for those have the time to explore further. [»](#)