

GoNomad

A Java Jaunt to Volcanoes and Temples



Dieng thermal springs, a relaxing place to soak in Java. Mike Smith photos.

Central Java Has A Rich Culture & Spectacular Ancient Temples. Add In Smoking Volcanoes, Spicy Food & Charming Locals & You Have All The Ingredients For A Great Place To Visit

By Mike Smith
Central Java



Central Java has active volcanoes, rice fields, and the beautiful temples of Borobudur & Prambanan. However, there are many more things to see so I extended my trip to experience cool mountain resorts, upscale spas & fascinating cottage industries.

A Religious Heritage

Borobudur – An Iconic Monument

No trip to Central Java is complete without a visit to Borobudur, the largest Buddhist stupa in the world.

Borobudur was built in the 9th Century & over time was buried by volcanic ash from Mount Merapi. It lay hidden for many years before being restored. It is now, by far, the most famous attraction in the region.

Arriving by bus at the temple parking area we were greeted by swarms of hawkers running towards us. Banter & bargain in good humour with the gauntlet of vendors selling everything including hats, tee shirts, fans, drinks, postcards & kites because it is impossible to avoid them! The summit is the highlight. I survived the short, steep, sweaty climb & was rewarded with stunning views of the surrounding countryside & the opportunity to see giggling tourists struggling to touch Buddha statues through holes in the smaller stupas.



A buddha at Borobudur a huge buddhist stupa in Java, always worth a visit.

Prambanan Inspires

The Prambanan Temple Group is the largest Hindu complex in Indonesia & was also built in the 9th century.

The 3 most important temples are dedicated to the Hindu gods Brahma, Shiva & Vishnu. You can watch a performance of the Ramayana Ballet on an open air stage while dining & enjoying the sun set with hundreds of dancers & musicians in vivid, traditional clothes.

Wandering away from the main complex I had this massive place almost to myself. There were other smaller Hindu temples & I was somewhat surprised to find that Candi Sewu, the second largest Buddhist temple in Java, was in the grounds. It has been badly damaged by the 2006 earthquake but has impressive guardians & a nice atmosphere.

Traveling Solo



A horse pulled carriage to get around Solo, in central Java. Here is one of the Kratons.

From Prambanan we drove to Solo, formerly known as Surakarta. This clean, green city with many dance, music & theatre groups has little compelling pull power for me, except when there are carnivals on.

Solo's key tangible assets are its two kratons and the private **Museum Batik Danar Hadi** which has a fantastic collection. The museum also contains a sizable batik manufacturing factory which I found particularly interesting. Workers use both hand painting & copper stamp techniques to prepare their cloth. The big vats of dyes & drying cloth are incredibly striking. Solo is, however, a good base for several excellent side trips by car or motorbike.



The batik factory in Solo. There is also a batik museum here.

Sweet Sweet Music & Going Crackers

I love the fact that Central Java has an abundance of accessible cottage industries which welcome visitors.



Firing a gamelon, a large bronze musical gong in Wirun, Central Java.

This one was dark & noisy. Hammers were beating & sparks flying. I was in Wirun, 5 km East of Solo at Supoyo's gamelan manufacturing factory. Large bronze musical gongs were being produced in a hot, dusty environment.

The instruments are made by a technique which has barely changed in hundreds of years. Supoyo claimed that neither technology nor machinery can improve upon the methods the craftsmen use, passed down via apprenticeships from one generation to the next.

On the way back to Solo our guide led us to a rice cracker factory in a huge house & I spent an unforgettable half hour chatting in my very basic Bahasa Indonesia, taking photos & of course sampling the snacks!

Exotic Temples

40 km from Solo, in beautiful countryside on the very steep slopes of Mount Lawu, are the Hindu temples of **Ceto & Suku**, the only erotic temples in Java. Suku is a small complex with the main temple reminding me of a Mayan Pyramid. Some of the statues & reliefs are very explicit & are said to symbolize the importance & pleasure of sexuality in life.

Ceto is significantly larger & set on several terraces on a hill. The entrance reminded me of a Bali Temple. The symbolism is slightly more subtle than at Suku & is claimed to be dedicated to fertility. The simpler crude designs in this remote area contrast nicely with the sophisticated art works of Borobudur & Prambanan.

Head in the Clouds – Dieng Plateau



Sunrise at Gunung Sikunir, central Java.

The Dieng Plateau is too far for a day trip to do it justice. The road climbs to 2000 meters passing through wonderful countryside planted with coffee, tea & tobacco plus hardy vegetables like potatoes & carrots. The oldest Hindu temples of Arjuna were deserted when I arrived mid-afternoon. I enjoyed the peaceful plateau & simple monuments. The thermal springs & boiling mud with the characteristic sulphur smell were impressive too.

Be warned – it gets very cold at night; I wasn't prepared & had to borrow a thick jacket! There was frost on the ground at 4am as my guide led me gingerly, by torchlight, up a steep, narrow, track up **Gunung Sikunir** to our viewpoint where we waited for sunrise.

As first light dawned I was thankful I had put in the effort to make this climb. What a spectacular & surreal sight greeted us; it was rather like being in an aircraft with the clouds below which slowly dissipated as the morning sun arose.



Tobacco drying in the hot sun.

Semarang Old Town & Spa Coffee all over



Kraton Mangkunegara solo

Heading back to Semarang we detoured to the former Losari Coffee Plantation Resort & Spa, now known as Mesastila,

Most visitors go there not only for the romantic setting but also for the award winning spa. The pride of the spa is the Hamam which is an authentic Turkish steam bath but I preferred the Losari coffee scrub – which utilizes a blend of freshly ground plantation coffee, coconut milk, yoghurt & cinnamon.

Semarang hasn't too much to offer tourists but I did enjoy the Grand Mosque & Lawang Sewu the restored former railway headquarters later a Japanese army camp & its tales of ghosts. Hearing the jazz jamming session at Dafam Hotel was a great finale to the trip.

My Java jaunts were great because I had time & private transport to get around. Traffic congestion can be a problem but the volcanoes, rice fields & historic monuments more than compensate!