



# JAVA JAUNTS & SOLO SINGS

Central Java has a rich culture and spectacular ancient temples. Add in smoking volcanoes, spicy food and charming locals and you have all the ingredients for a great place to visit, writes **Mike Smith**.



Above the clouds at Gunung Sikunir



Borobudur Stretch

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

### **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 and over time was buried by volcanic ash from Mount Merapi. It lay hidden for many years before Stamford Raffles rediscovered it and it was subsequently 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 trying to sell us everything from hats, tee shirts, fans, and drinks, to postcards and kites. There was good natured banter and bargaining with the gauntlet of vendors because it is impossible to avoid them!

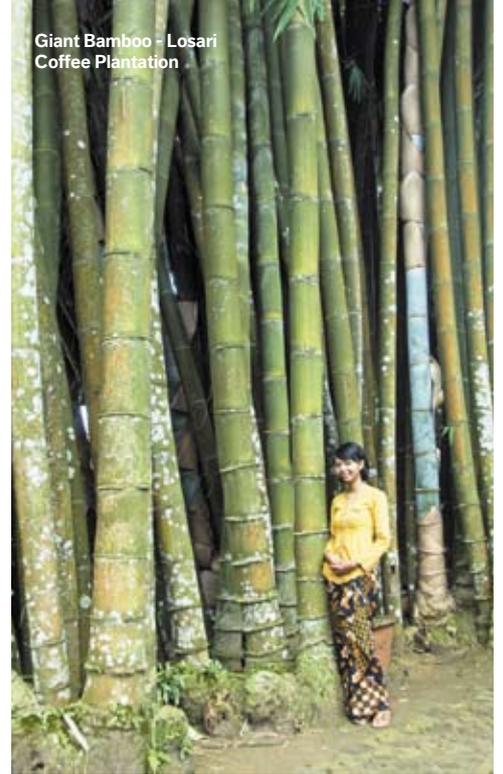
The summit is the highlight. I survived the short, steep, sweaty climb and was rewarded with stunning views of the surrounding countryside and the opportunity to see giggling tourists struggling to touch Buddha statues through holes in the smaller stupas.

### **Prambanan Inspires**

The Prambanan Temple Group is the largest Hindu complex in Indonesia and was also



Kraton Solo



built in the 9th century.

The three most important temples are dedicated to the Hindu gods Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu. While dining and enjoying the sunset you can watch a performance of the Ramayana Ballet on an open air stage with hundreds of dancers and 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 and I was somewhat surprised to find that Candi Sewu, the second largest Buddhist temple in Java, is in the grounds. It was badly damaged by the 2006 earthquake, but has impressive guardians and a nice atmosphere.

### Travelling Solo

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

Solo's key tangible assets are its two

kratons (royal palaces) 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 and copper stamp techniques to prepare their cloth. The big vats of dyes and drying cloth are incredibly striking.

Solo is, however, a good base for several excellent side trips by car or motorbike.

### Going Crackers with Sweet Music

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

This one was dark and noisy. Hammers were beating and sparks flying. I was in Wirun, 5k 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 and, of course, sampling the snacks!

### Exotic Temples

In beautiful countryside 40 km from Solo, on the very steep slopes of Mount Lawu, are the Hindu temples of Ceto and 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 and reliefs are very explicit and are said to symbolize the importance and pleasure of sexuality in life. Ceto is significantly larger and set on several terraces on a hill. The entrance reminded me of a Bali Temple. The symbolism is slightly more subtle than at Suku and is claimed to be dedicated to fertility. The simpler crude designs in this remote area contrast nicely with the sophisticated art works of Borobudur and Prambanan.

### Head in the Clouds

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

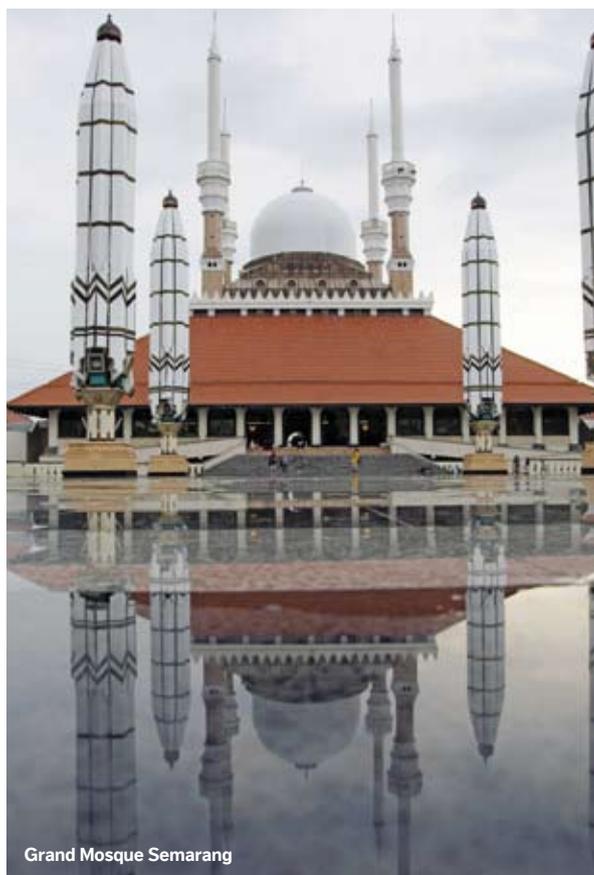
Be warned – it gets very cold at night; I wasn't prepared and had to borrow a thick jacket! There was frost on the ground at 4:00am as my guide led me gingerly, by



Sewu Temple near Prambanan



Dieng Mosque



Grand Mosque Semarang

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 and surreal sight greeted us; it was rather like being in an aircraft with the clouds below that slowly dissipated as the morning sun arose.

### Semarang Old Town & Spa

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 utilises a blend of freshly ground plantation coffee, coconut milk, yoghurt and cinnamon.

Semarang hasn't too much to offer tourists, but I did enjoy the Grand Mosque and Lawang Sewu the restored former railway headquarters, which was a Japanese army camp with 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 and private transport to get around. Traffic congestion can be a problem, but the volcanoes, rice fields and historic monuments more than compensate! **AJ**

#### INFORMATION

**Batavia Air** flies regularly to Semarang from Singapore ([www.batavia-air.com](http://www.batavia-air.com))

**Hotels:** **Semarang** Dafam Hotel ([www.dafamhotels.com](http://www.dafamhotels.com));

Gumaya Tower Hotel ([www.gumayatowerhotel.com](http://www.gumayatowerhotel.com))

**Solo:** Lorin Hotel ([www.lorinhotel.com](http://www.lorinhotel.com))