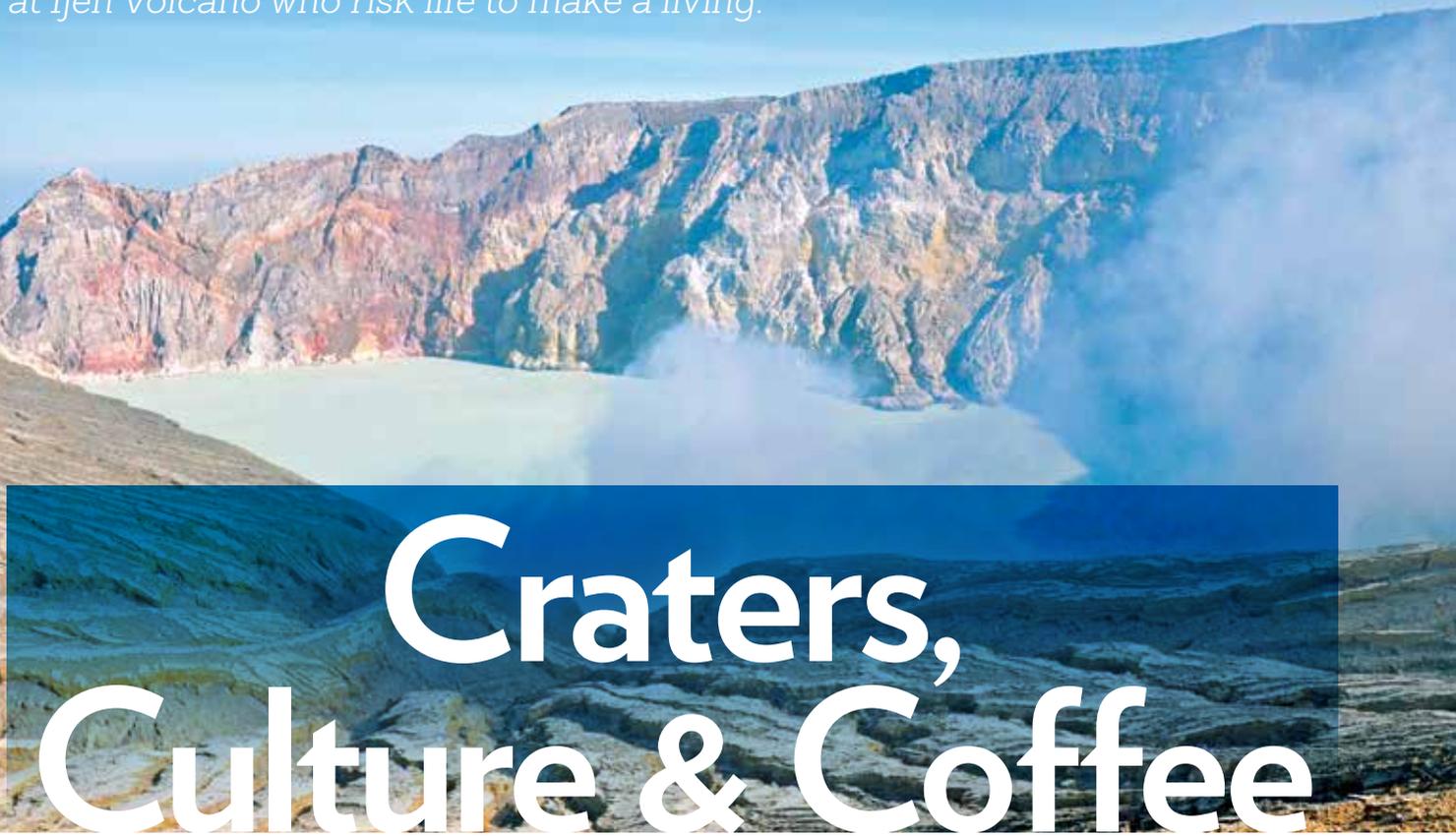


Mike Smith had never heard of Banyuwangi in East Java, Indonesia, but he won't forget it in a hurry, primarily because of the hard toil of the sulphur miners at Ijen Volcano who risk life to make a living.



Craters, Culture & Coffee

Ijen Crater

Another mini whirlwind, another face full of choking dust! Masks or scarves covering our mouths and noses we continued our plodding, steep ascent up to Ijen Crater at an elevation of 2883m above sea level. I'd got up at 4:00am for this expedition and hoped it was going to be worth it.

There was a welcome break after an hour, a small café in the middle of nowhere selling thick, granular hot coffee. Refreshed we started climbing again with the encouraging words that it was only another 45-minute trek to the top, albeit on a narrow, dirt track with scary cliff drop offs.

A Steaming Crater

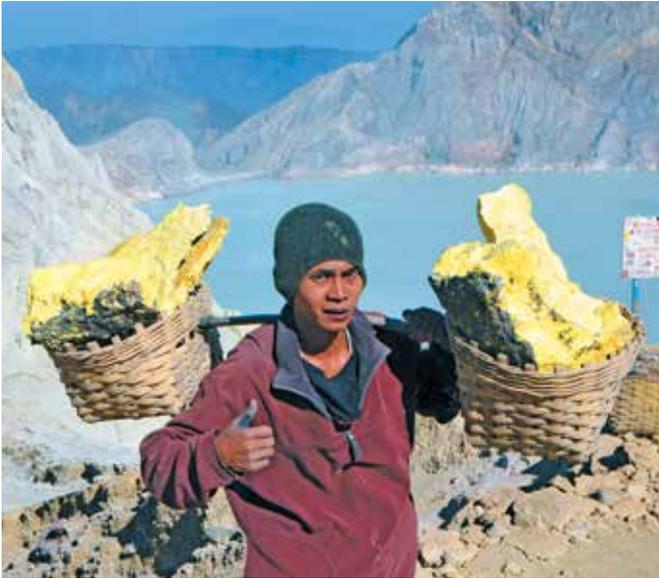
A few days previously mini earth tremors had opened up gaps in the earth at Ijen, spewing out toxic gas. A warning message clearly spelled that out on a large sign board as we reached the crater summit. We were advised not to go down to the lake nor see the famous blue flame of burning sulphur.

However, that didn't spoil the trip; the view from the rim of the 1km diameter crater was amazing and our efforts clearly well rewarded. Beautiful colours, sheer crater walls, steaming gases and a turquoise lake all set off by a bright blue sky made a wonderful sight. Clouds of steam would regularly make the visibility zero and atmospheric but it soon cleared.



Safety Warnings Ignored

When I saw the sulphur miners I knew I shouldn't complain about the energy I had used during the climb. I had simply carried a camera plus a stick to help keep my balance on the slippery track to the peak. These guys went right into the crater to collect bright yellow lumps of



sulphur from the steaming fumaroles, ignoring the safety warnings, to load their baskets with the precious element which is processed and then used to bleach sugar and to make matches and fertiliser.

They carry 70kg of sulphur in baskets down the steep mountain trail in two baskets, supported on a springy plank of wood, straddling their shoulders. Eyelashes dyed yellow from the sulphur and shoulders heavily scarred from their load, these brave, hard working men earn their living extracting sulphur amidst the toxic gases of the crater. It's a dangerous task, relatively well paid, but with many deaths over the years.

Loving my hour or so on the peak until the wind changed direction and all I could see was steam I slowly and tentatively made my way down the mountain. A miner skipped past me with his precious haul, like a mountain goat, leaving me way behind on his way to Paltuding Valley where he would be relieved of his cargo and receive his pay.

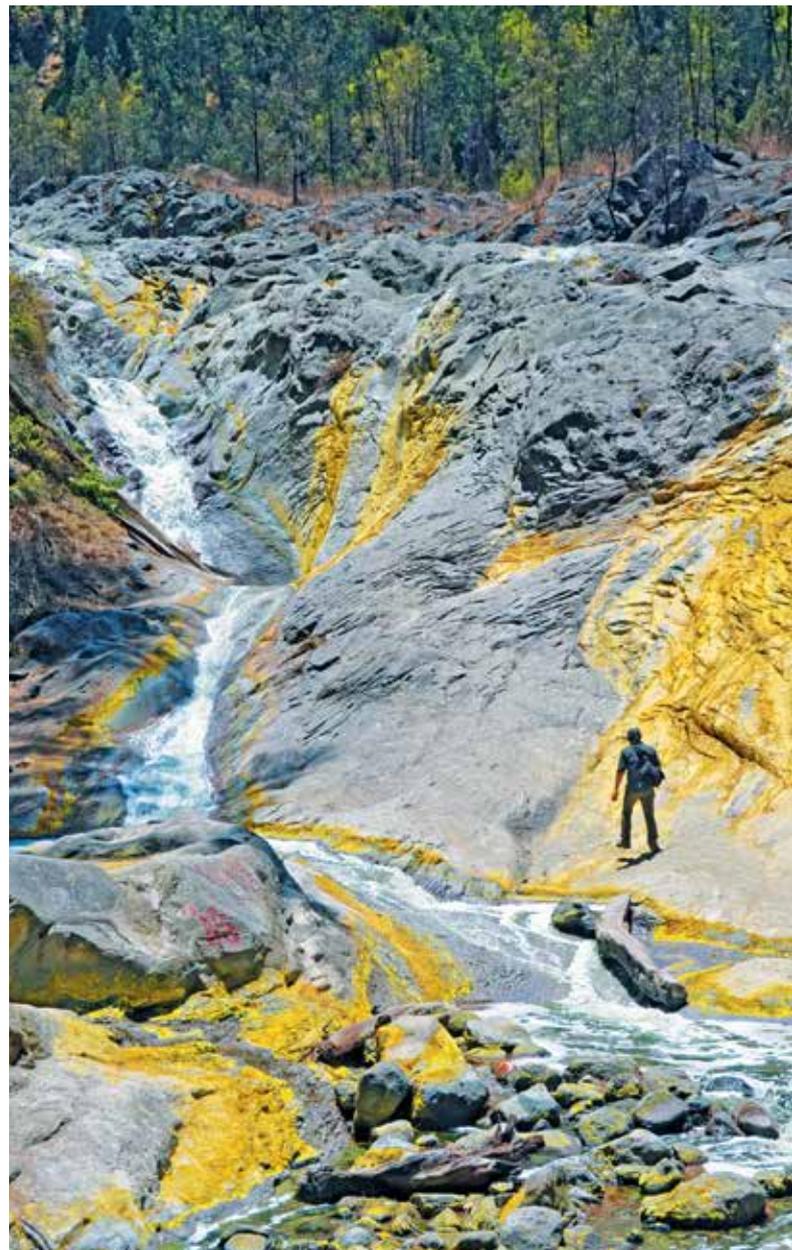
On the more relaxed descent I stopped for a pot of instant noodles at the remote café; never had such simple food tasted so good!

Yellow River Yellow

Rewarded with a box breakfast at the base camp we scooped it down before heading to the nearby yellow river, officially known as the Banyupahit River, with deposits of gleaming sulphur along its banks. Despite being photogenic the crystal clear water is acidic and detrimental to the environment.

On the drive back towards Banyuwangi through the highlands we stopped to photograph a coffee plantation, its trees richly loaded with coffee beans, when a crowd of plantation workers arrived to sort and grade their beans.

Searching for shade from the blistering sun, the female workers carefully discarded leaves and poor quality beans as the supervisor paid close attention to their efforts. They were soon targets of our group of 'paparazzi' which some appreciated for its novelty factor while others just got on with their work.





The Mayor of Banyuwangi

The Mayor of Banyuwangi, Abdullah Aswar Anas, is trying to develop Banyuwangi City as a tourist destination in its own right. I suspect most Western tourists will find little to attract them unless the spectacular carnival is on. There are few historical buildings and no pubs or entertainment so I think that most tourists would head straight to the many excellent natural attractions in Banyuwangi Regency rather than stay in the city.

The 2015 Banyuwangi Ethno Carnival was themed on a Usingnese Royal Wedding and was a riot of colour with hundreds of participants marching, dancing and strutting

through the stadium at Taman Blambangan and then 5km along local roads in the city centre. It was slow to get going with the obligatory lengthy speeches thanking anyone who had had anything to do with the carnival, prayers and the National Anthem taking an inordinately long time as the crowd sweltered in the heat. However, once things started moving it was truly impressive.

I was tired just watching the event, but some of the costumes showcasing different fashions of wedding attire weighed close to 20kg so it was no surprise that the occasional participant flagged from the 30°C heat and 80% humidity at the end of the parade.





Kemiren's Girl Band

A girl band greeted our entry to Kemiren Village, 8km from Banyuwangi, home to the Usingese tribe. These 'girls' were all over 75 years old and played lesung music with their rice pounding sticks, a skill developed to entertain and relieve boredom while labouring. They loved what they were doing and during intervals they chewed the ubiquitous betel nut stimulants which turned their mouths a deep blood red.

The follow up act to the girl band in Kemiren Village was a Usingese Barong Dance, slightly reminiscent of that seen in Bali, but with a smaller cast. The main character is a mystical beast with big eyes and tusks with two fowls as accomplices. Of course, as in all great folklore, good wins over evil and they all live happily ever after.

The Usingese still prepare coffee manually and roast





the beans over a wooden fire for 20 minutes. The change in colour and lovely aroma make it a pleasure to witness. A hot cup of freshly brewed cup of coffee added to the experience, not to mention delicious satay, oxtail soup and the fried bananas that accompanied it.

Get on My Goat

It was almost time to leave Banyuwangi, but one small attraction caught my attention right next to the Hotel Santika where we were staying. An old fashioned weekend market selling live sheep and goats was in full swing. Clearly a place to do business, you must haggle fiercely and chat and, in my case share a few jokes, with the traders. A fun way to end the trip.

Banyuwangi turned out to be a great place to spend a couple of days with the highlights the climb up Mount Ijen

and the carnival. There are other places to visit including Pulau Merah with its huge “reddish rock”, sandy beaches and Muncar fishing village. It is also only a 20 minute plane ride or 2 hour ferry journey from Bali, the Crown Jewel of Indonesia where I was heading next. 

POCKET GUIDE

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Hotel Santika

www.santikabanyuwangi.com/