



BOROBUDUR—GHOST OF A LOST KINGDOM

The night was warm and humid, but the carved stones I rested on were cool. As the first sliver of sun appeared from behind the smoking peak of Gunung Sumbing I had one of those rare experiences that indelibly imprint themselves on the soul. Moments like this are fleeting but priceless. They are addictive too, and chasing them is the reason I have spent the past twenty years returning to Asia again and again.



Religion has washed through the Indonesian archipelago like tides in the creek. First the animism common to indigenous south-east Asian peoples, then Hinduism, Buddhism, then Islam, and Christian missionaries arrived in the seventeenth century. Though Bali retains the human legacy of the great Hindu dynasties, and Christianity still exists in small pockets and islands, Indonesia stands today as the most populous majority-Muslim nation on earth.

In the early nineteenth century the British briefly wrested control of the island of Java from the Dutch. It must have seemed to the Governor that there was nothing left of the great Buddhist kingdoms. But Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (he of the famous hotel in Singapore) was a curious chap, so when he heard in 1814 that there was something mysterious in the south of the island on the great plain between the volcanoes, he sent emissaries across the mountainous highlands to investigate. There they found the locals talking in hushed tones about a hill that was avoided with fear and suspicion. The colonials had no such compunction, and they cut back the vegetation. What they found must have had a similar impact to Howard Carter's epiphany at Tutankhamen's tomb: under the coiled lianas and vines lay the immense and intricate monument of Borobudur.

They uncovered thousands of castellations, buttresses, alcoves, spitting gargoyles and statues of the Buddha, which stretch thirty-five metres up an edifice with a footprint as big as that of the Great Pyramid of Giza. Four terraces ring the monument, linked by vertiginous steps, each lined with thousands of exquisite and intricate bas-reliefs of the Buddha's life, which combine to create a pilgrimage path of meditative contemplation. On the flat top of the step pyramid are three concentric circular platforms bearing dozens of hollow bell-shaped stupas, carved from rock in crosshatch as if woven, each containing an exquisite life-sized Buddha, who can be peeked at or even touched through the diamond-shaped perforations. The zenith of the monument is a huge stupa that remains inexplicably, or perhaps symbolically, empty.

Thanks to centuries of abandonment and overgrowth—and possibly the suspicion with which it was regarded by the locals—it was remarkably well preserved. A UNESCO project in 1973 restored it to near perfection. Built in the ninth century under the Saliendra dynasty, its origins are nonetheless mysterious, since no records exist of its construction—even though the

mandala, constructed from 55,000 cubic metres of stone quarried from around the plain and assembled without a single drop of mortar, must have taken decades and have involved thousands of artisans. It had once been a place of pilgrimage, and after it was rediscovered by Raffles it regained that status, with nineteenth-century Buddhists visiting it from as far away as India.

I flew to Java in April 2012 with the sole intention of visiting Borobudur. From the glitz- and slum-ridden sprawl of Jakarta I rode a comfortable and air-conditioned ‘Eksekutif’ class train east through the lush green rice paddies, until it climbed southwards through the highlands and descended to the bustling but friendly city of Yogyakarta.

My seat-mate on the train was a young woman wearing a hijab. Congratulating myself on my cultural sensitivity, I maintained a respectful silence and was conscious not to inadvertently touch her. It was when she told me a ribald joke in perfect English and slapped my arm as she laughed that I realised I had been found guilty of condescension. Rather than a demure and silent symbol of repression, the charming Wen turned out to be a senior telecoms engineer with a degree in electronics, who was bringing her fluffy white cat Bubu, who sat patiently in a box at our feet, to stay with her family. When we arrived, she insisted that I allow her father to drive me to my hotel. I had made assumptions about Wen based on how she was dressed, but her intelligence, charm and generosity taught me that often a headscarf is just a headscarf.

The village of Borobudur, an hour and a half by taxi from ‘Jogja’, is dusty and uninspiring, dotted with cheap hotels and the odd resort. But within the manicured lawns of the World Heritage site lies the rather clinical Manohara Hotel. The reason to stay here is compelling, though: free access to the monument throughout one’s stay, and a hefty discount on the privilege of being admitted to the monument at 4.30am to watch dawn break. I stayed for two nights, and climbed the monument five times. During the day it teemed with people, and I felt like a rock star: children on school trips shouted, “mister, mister”, and queued up to have their photograph taken with me.

Outside Jakarta, I found Indonesia to be a charming country, surprisingly easy to get around, filled with curious, friendly and helpful people. And it is breathtakingly cheap—at £40 a night, the Manohara was the largest expense I incurred. My none-hour train journey was less than £10, and most of the delicious meals I ate were scarcely more than £1.

For more than 1,200 years, the magnificence of Borobudur has endured neglect, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and even a politically-motivated bomb. Though Indonesia has its issues with poverty, unrest and fundamentalism, it is a testament to the plurality and tolerance of this secular Muslim democracy that a Buddhist monument has become one of the cornerstones of the country’s tourist industry, as well as a site of pilgrimage for Buddhists all over the world. Surprisingly, for something so mind-bogglingly impressive, Borobudur only gets a million visitors a year, and most of them are domestic. See it now before the secret is out.

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