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About 1150 words

EXPLORING TORAJALAND

by
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A dull fatigue has set in as we bounce along through central Sulawesi in an old bus on a flat, dusty road. Our bones ache and all senses are dull, but then we rattle into our destination, Torajaland.

We begin to revive as the scenery changes. This roughly 30-mile-long valley is surrounded by low, jagged limestone mountains. Lush, green, checkerboard rice fields stretch out across the valley floor, with a narrow, chalky-blue river threading its way along beside the rough road.

The serenity and natural beauty are just bonuses here in one of Indonesia's most interesting regions, Tanatoraja, or Torajaland. Soon we begin to see unique, crescent-roofed bamboo houses, arranged in small hamlets around the edges of the rice fields.

The homes are built several feet off the ground on stilts. They stand side by side, long but narrow, with sweeping roof lines roughly resembling the shape of a water buffalo's horns. They always face north and usually have a wooden buffalo head on the front for luck (Water buffalo are revered in Torajaland, although this does not prevent them from being featured in the local diet.)

There are a couple of small, tidy villages created especially for foreign tourists, but these often lack the labor-intensive exterior decorations and the stacks of buffalo horns in front. Traditional-style accommodations for tourists are also being built but they too lack authentic touches.

You will be delighted to finally tumble out of the bus; this is an area to explore and wander. Venture to some of the more remote villages to find authentic homes with intricately carved exterior wall panels. Although the multi-layered bamboo roofs are said to last 50 years, they also take six months of difficult labor to construct.

(Many homes in the larger villages now have tin roofs.) The locals are happy to give you a quick look inside, but the main beauty and interest is on the exterior in the quality and design of the carvings and paintings.

The main center for exploration is the town of Rantepao, located in the north center of Torajaland. Take 20 minutes and climb the nearby Mount Singki for a panoramic view of the valley's villages and rice fields. The best bet for exploring is to rent a motorbike and travel the rocky road north of town for a look at the villages and some fantastic, extensive rice terraces.

For all its natural and architectural beauty, though, there is another reason people visit Torajaland. The locals have elaborate and colorful funeral ceremonies and strange, yet fascinating, burial customs.

I realized the burial customs would stick in my mind long afterward when I stumbled over a rock on a path and, looking down, realized it was in fact a human skull.

No, Torajaland is not for the faint of heart.

No one knows for sure why the tradition started, but the Torajans lay their dead to rest just inside the entrances to the area's many hillside caves. Or they hang the coffins from cliff sides on poles bored into the rock. Or they carve out holes in the rock cliffs and seal the bodies inside.

The final resting place for a village member is determined by his or her social standing. Paupers are given simple wooden coffins which are stacked like firewood in the caves. Someone a bit better off might have a nicer coffin or more advantageous place in the cave, up on a ledge.

Those from more ambitious families might be "buried" outside the cave, from 15 to 25 feet off the ground in the hanging graves. These are extremely difficult to reach, which helps prevent looting of valuable keepsakes enclosed in the coffin.

This does, however, have a drawback. As the wooden coffins rot, the bones can fall out unceremoniously onto the pathways below, tripping up unsuspecting tourists.

For me, the only way to go is the way of the wealthy. A special woodcarver makes a "tau tau", a personal, mannequin-like effigy of the deceased. Upon burial, their remains are sealed into the rock cliffs, and their tau tau is left with others in a covered "waiting room" set into the cliff. There they stand, watching out over the rice fields like spectators at a tennis match.

Of course all this is preceded with a huge funeral ceremony, which is just slightly more elaborate than the family can afford.

Indeed, a local young man somewhat sadly confided in me, "You in the west save your money to travel and see other things. Here we save all our money just to bury it."

After a death there are two services: one soon afterward and another, often years later, after the family has saved and made the appropriate preparations.

The ceremonies involve all extended family members, no matter how remote, and the slaughter of chickens, pigs and water buffalo. The more buffalo, the more important the deceased.

We happened to visit during the ceremony for a very wealthy and influential couple. Each day for three days, 15 buffalo and 100 pigs were butchered, and members of 178 individual families attended. (By contrast, a commoner might have one or two buffalo and a couple of pigs slaughtered in a one-day ceremony.)

The members of each family were housed in their own hut; in fact an entire village was created to be used just for this one extensive ceremony. Obviously they were well-fed but it appeared much of the extra pork ended up in the local markets.

Tourists are welcome to visit the ceremonies and are usually expected to bring a small gift, such as candy or sugar. If you are squeamish don't come in the morning when they butcher the animals.

The tourist office in Rantepao keeps a list of funeral ceremonies, which are normally held in the months after

May. Guides can be useful when going to the ceremonies, to translate and explain what is going on. They often will approach you in the restaurants to offer their services, and reasonable fees are easily negotiated.

Rantepao can be reached by a short flight or several-hour bus ride from Ujung Padang, Sulawesi's main port city. There is also a direct charter flight from Bali and flights may also begin soon from Jakarta. A range of accommodations are available, ranging from tourist-class resort hotels to simple, family-run losmans (budget guesthouses which come in a variety of sizes and luxury). Restaurants are abundant and the food is good.

Buffalo is featured prominently in the local dishes and it is really quite tasty. The prices are low and the locals are hospitable and friendly.

Just one word of caution - the local roads can be bumpy. Bring a sitting cushion, plenty of film, a sense of adventure and steady nerves. And, don't forget to look down while walking under the hanging graves.