



## A NEW SEASON FOR SUMBA

*IN AN UNTAMED CORNER OF EASTERN INDONESIA, WHERE SHAMANS AND SEA WORMS DICTATE THE CYCLES OF RITUAL LIFE AND HORSEMEN DO BATTLE ON SUNBAKED FIELDS, A LAID-BACK BEACH RESORT HAS FORGED A CLOSE-KIT RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS COMMUNITY—AND SET THE STANDARD FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ON THE REMARKABLE ISLAND OF SUMBA*

BY JOHNNY LANGENHEIM  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES MORGAN



**CLEAN BREAK**  
Overlooking the rollers of Nihiwatu Bay. Opposite: Dato, the headwaiter at Nihiwatu, has been with the property since it opened 13 years ago; he is also a clan chieftain in the nearby village of Waihola.



**High above** a moonlit valley on the southwest coast of Sumba, three *ratos* (shaman priests) sit cross-legged on a great burial stone. One of them murmurs incantations as he absently stirs a gourd full of pungent betel. At some preordained moment, all three begin a slow ululation that gradually fades into the predawn silence. Their voices seem to echo back from the far side of the valley, but then I realize that the chant has been taken up by other holy men in the villages below us. They are summoning the *nyale*, sea worms that, as manifestations of a sea goddess of the same name, are augurs of the year ahead. The *ratos* rise and begin walking down toward the ocean, unaccountably sure-footed in the darkness. I stumble after them, feeling every one of the 72 hours that I've been awake.

The people of Sumba, a Jamaica-size island in eastern Indonesia, are as adept at divination as they are at the age-old ritual of sacrifice. They read signs in the eviscerated entrails of chickens; they butcher water buffalo and horses so that the dead are provided for in the after-life. And they shed each other's blood in ritual battles with just as much gusto. Theirs is one of the last megalithic cultures on earth, the dead residing among the living in giant tombs etched with esoteric symbols. Though Christianity has been widely adopted, the animistic Marapu belief system continues to thrive alongside it as one of the world's last animist religions. Yet this tropical backwater is being touted by many as the future jewel of Indonesian tourism. Some are even calling it the next Bali.

"I sincerely hope not!" The sardonic ring

**ANOTHER WORLD**

Shaman Rato Danguduka chewing betel before the Pasola festival, below. Above: Sumba is known across Indonesia for its sturdy breed of horses. Opposite: High-peaked roofs—a distinctive feature of the island's traditional architecture—tower over a village in the Wanukaka district.



in Claude Graves' voice was clear even over a dodgy Skype connection. Sumba was still a week away and I was sitting hunkered over my laptop as London slowly froze over. "I'm hoping things will be much more sustainable in Sumba; luxury tourism done properly, in line with the island's environmental and social makeup."

A bold vision, perhaps—but then this is a guy who chose a remote (even by Sumba standards) stretch of shoreline to build Nihiwatu, today among the most singular boutique resorts in the world with a string of industry accolades to its name. Graves, a lanky American who washed up on Sumba in 1988, is also the reason I now find myself blundering down a mountainside behind a trio of *woo-wooing* shamans, a wad of betel leaves tucked in my cheek to stave off sleep. Few outsiders get to witness this rite, and it is only Graves's good standing with the community that has made my tagging along possible. I've come here with a small film crew to document a remarkable ritual cycle that will culminate in a few hours' time when hundreds of warriors charge at each other on horseback, hurling spears with grievous intent in a bloody battle known as the Pasola. Graves has also hooked us up with the Weru family, one of the more influential clans in West Sumba, through his close friend and associate Rudy Weru.

Our first four days were spent in the pretty village of Wanukaka, immersing ourselves in the buildup to the battle. This included an audience with Wanukaka's most revered holy man, Rato Danguduka. He lives, appropriately, on top of a mountain. And he looks the part, too. One side of his wizened face is covered in a smoky birthmark; electric-blue rings encircle his irises. If anyone could explain the Pasola to me, it would be him.



*WANUKAKA'S MOST REVERED HOLY MAN LIVES, APPROPRIATELY, ON TOP OF A MOUNTAIN. AND HE LOOKS THE PART, TOO. ONE SIDE OF HIS WIZENED FACE IS COVERED IN A SMOKY BIRTHMARK; ELECTRIC-BLUE RINGS ENCIRCLE HIS IRISES*



"It is for the harvest," the old man intoned with poetic formality in the local dialect. "When the warriors go into battle, the community is hungry. They fight so that the rice will be bountiful. Therefore the fight is a good one." Good, so long as someone gets hurt. What he's basically talking about is a blood libation—an offering to the earth to make it fertile. On Sumba, it always comes back to blood.

The following morning at 2 a.m. I found myself on a remote beach beneath a gibbous moon, carried along by a surging sea of humanity. Flashes of torchlight illuminated wide-eyed faces as people poured down steps hewn into a limestone cliff. Fearsome war cries signaled that a fight had broken out, and I surfed the crowd as best I could to get a closer look. This was the Pajura, a boxing festival that is another important precursor to the Pasola. Fighters, their hands wrapped with makeshift boxing gloves of tough plant fiber, moved through the melee, teaming up with others from the same clan, looking for

opponents. A referee of sorts materialized and the teams faced off, screaming and hopping up and down until someone made an initial attack. Injuries—bloodied or broken noses, even fractured skulls—are common during the Pajura. It's not unheard of for fighters to surreptitiously place stones in their fists under the cover of darkness. When I finally reached it, the fight was in full swing. We couldn't see much in the moonlight, but dull thuds and vicious shouts filled the air; when a boxer came hurtling toward us and playfully sucker punched the cameraman in the stomach, we decided to beat a retreat.

Just why Sumba evolved such an idiosyncratic culture is not entirely clear, though its relative isolation may have had something to do with it. Unlike the closely knit string of islands—Bali, Lombok, Sumbawa, and Flores—to its north, Sumba lies a good 50 kilometers from the nearest landfall. The Sumbanese are of mixed Malay and Melanesian heritage, and while tentatively colonized by the Portuguese and later the Dutch, they have always been fiercely independent, embroiled in an insular drama of land disputes, clan wars, and struggles between local principalities. No one has ever been that keen on interfering. For a while, the sandalwood forests in eastern Sumba provided a lucrative export, until clear-cutting turned lush monsoon forests into savanna. After that, traders tended to give the island and its headhunting traditions a wide berth.

THE TRIO OF SHAMANS lead us down the mountain and on through the village. What began as a tiny group has swelled into a lengthy procession by the time we arrive at Wanukaka Beach. Dawn begins to lift on a crowd that numbers in the thousands, but the ratos sit apart, talking quietly among themselves, resplendent in their feather headdresses and rich ikat sarongs. Finally, two of them rise and walk slowly out into the ocean, picking their way over the rocks. The crowd is hushed, expectant. There have been years when the nyale failed to appear at the ordained time, the worst possible omen for the harvest.

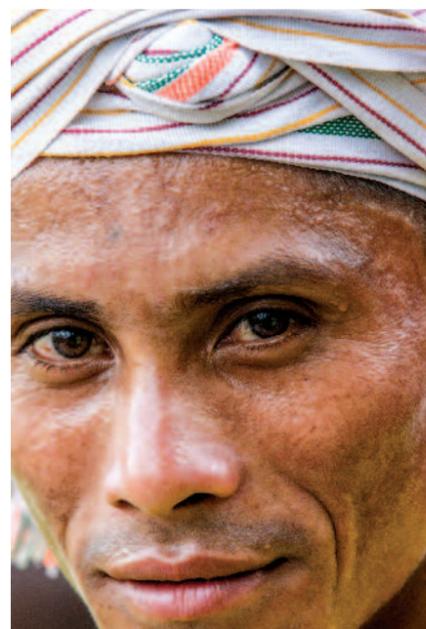
Both ratos return with a handful of fat, bluish worms, and there is an audible ripple of relief as the news spreads. Soon, half the crowd is splashing around in the shallows, scooping up the wriggling worms and stuffing them in jars to be enjoyed as a breakfast delicacy the next morning. There's no sense in wasting the generous offerings of the spirits. I spot a member of the Weru clan astride his sturdy little pony. "*Ayo! Sudah mau mulai Pasolanya,*" he shouts as he wheels away and gallops across the sand. *Come! The Pasola is about to start.*

We stumble blearily to the other end of

**SNAPSHOTS OF SUMBA**

Clockwise from above: Preparing rice for the kitchen at Nihiwatu Estate, where chef Neil Wager sources most of his produce from local farmers; a Pasola fighter resting between clashes; Nihiwatu Beach. Opposite: On the steps of the resort's vernacular-style reception pavilion.

*THE SHAMAN SIT APART, TALKING QUIETLY AMONG THEMSELVES, RESPLENDENT IN THEIR RICH IKAT SARONGS AND FEATHER HEADDRESSES. FINALLY, TWO OF THEM RISE AND WALK SLOWLY OUT INTO THE OCEAN, PICKING THEIR WAY OVER THE ROCKS*



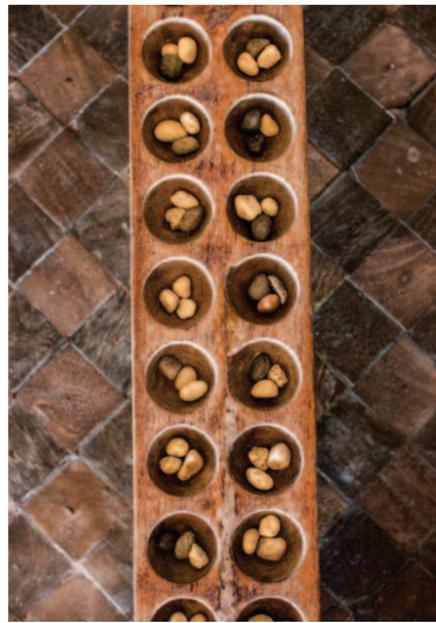
OPPOSITE: MUHAMMAD FADLI



**LUSH LIFE**  
 Left: Rice fields cover much of the West Sumba countryside. Right: A *congklak* (the Malay version of mancala) board in a Nihiwatu suite, which also come adorned with ikat wall hangings and traditional flower arrangements (below).



**HOT TO TROT**  
 Clockwise from above: Pasola warriors armed with blunt wooden spears prepare to join the fray; taking in sunset views of the Indian Ocean from the main swimming pool at Nihiwatu; a masseuse at the resort's spa with the ingredients for a *mandi lulur* body scrub.





*A HUNDRED HORSEMEN ARE CAREENING ACROSS MY LINE OF VISION AND THE AIR IS THICK WITH SPEARS. SEVERAL RIDERS ARE UNHORSED IN THE INITIAL FRAY, BEFORE THINGS RESOLVE THEMSELVES INTO MORE ORDERED SORTIES*

smiling. “*Harus kacau,*” he adds—*There has to be chaos.* Yet even this apparently spontaneous outpouring of aggression is ritualized. I realize another aspect to these war games: they are a means of releasing communal tensions that have built up over the course of the year. Back at the Weru compound, someone offers me a plate of dog stew, which I politely refuse, accepting instead some surprisingly tasty sea worms, served raw and mashed. And then I sink helplessly into sleep.

I WAKE TO THE SOUND of breaking waves, and open my eyes to find myself on an oversize four-poster bed shrouded in a diaphanous mosquito net. A down pillow cradles my head; cool air wafts against my cheek. It’s a stark contrast to the child’s bunk bed I’d been folding my 1.9-meter frame into for the last few days. For a moment I have no idea where I am, nor do I care. This is bliss. Then I remember. The Pasola is over and I’m at Nihiwatu.

To be more accurate, I’m in a luxury villa, one of three new four-suite “residences” at Nihiwatu Estate, which made its debut last August on a site adjacent to the original resort opened by Claude Graves and his wife Petra (they’ve since divorced) in 2000. Some longtime fans may lament the dismantling of Nihiwatu’s earlier, more rustic bungalows, but I for one am not complaining as I sit sipping coffee in my plunge pool, gazing out at the

Indian Ocean far below. Later over breakfast, I quiz general manager George Vlachopoulos about the new-look resort.

“It’s an evolution of the original concept. I think with the nature of Nihiwatu, it couldn’t have happened any

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the beach to find a pitched battle underway between warriors of two rival clans, the Praibakul and Waihura. The riders charge at each other head on, letting their wooden spears fly and then peeling off to the right or left before they get too close. These days, the spears are blunted, but injuries and even deaths still occur. The agility of the horsemen is astonishing—they ride bareback and full tilt, clutching rope halters in one hand, their spears in the other. The best among them duck the enemy projectiles, sometimes even catching them with practiced nonchalance.

But this beachfront battle is just another precursor. As the sun begins to glaze the sand, we head inland to a flat pasture where the main battle is to take place. Police with riot shields press the crowd back as local dignitaries make longwinded speeches, protected from the sun by flowery umbrellas. I surface suddenly from an exhausted swoon to find a hundred horsemen careening across my line of vision and the air thick with spears. Several riders are unhorsed in the initial fray, before things resolve themselves into more ordered sorties.

The sun reaches its zenith and there is no sign of the clashes letting up. Then one of the Praibakul warriors takes a spear to the chest and falls off his horse to a chorus of jeers from the Waihura side. Furious, he picks up a rock and throws it—and suddenly stones rather than spears are arcing across the sky. The police let off a volley of warning shots and the Praibakul clan flees across the river.

“The Wanukaka Pasola always ends like this,” says Rudy Weru,

**GROOM SERVICE**

A rider tending to his decorated horse before the Pasola battle, above. Below: Village boys galloping through the surf. Opposite: A twilight stroll along the beach at Nihiwatu.



## SUMBA

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other way," he explains. When he says "Nihiwatu," he's really talking about Graves; and it has been more of an evolutionary leap than a gradual unfolding. Last year, Graves negotiated a new ownership deal with American billionaire Chris Burch and veteran hotelier James McBride. "Claude has talked to a lot of different people over the years about developing the Nihiwatu brand, but I think this was the first time that things really gelled," Vlachopolous says.

Graves concurs. "We discussed things for a really long time before forming this partnership. What's happening is exactly what I'd envisioned—the design work is in line with the original philosophy and our environmental values." Having new partners has freed Graves up to channel his considerable energies into the environmental and social projects that are fundamental to the Nihiwatu concept.

"Since 2005, the resort's been running on a 150-horsepower generator. We didn't like it, but we didn't have much choice," he says. "Now we've put in a compressed-air system that's reducing our fuel consumption by 80 percent. Plus, we've started make biodiesel from copra that we buy from the local community. Eventually, we won't have to use any fossil fuels at all." Yet Graves balks when I suggest the term "eco-resort." "That's just marketing bullshit. If you're building a five-star-plus product in a remote place, it's just logical to do it this way. We want to prove that point to other developers."

If there's one feature of Nihiwatu that has historically stood above all others, though, it's the wave—a majestic, barreling lefthander that can reach heights of up to 12 meters. It is quite simply one of the best waves to surf in the world, and it just so happens to break on one of the most spectacular golden beaches you're ever likely to see. Inevitably, it's been a huge draw for surf enthusiasts and until recently most visitors came here just to ride it. I discover why when Nihiwatu's resident surf instructor and all-round ocean guru Christian Sea takes me out for a lesson. It's the tail end of the monsoon, conditions are bad,

and I'm a total novice, but I still feel a visceral thrill that prompts an unbidden smile as the wave grabs me and throws me off my board.

"The thing is, there's so much more to Sumba than just surfing," says Vlachopolous. (Tell me about it, I think to myself as I demolish a bowl of fresh fruit, my first proper dose of vitamin C in a week.) "Nihiwatu Estate is really about enhancing the whole destination experience."

That experience, of course, begins with the resort itself. It's a work in progress, but the ante has been upped considerably in terms of luxury. Designed by Graves with help from a team of Bali-based architects, the three new residences mix the contemporary—sliding mirror doors, plunge pools, polished timber floors—with organic elements that pay homage to the tribal crafts of the island. Burch and McBride, meanwhile, have recruited British chef Neil Wager (lured here from Cambodia's Song Saa Private Island resort) to helm a high-caliber kitchen that relies almost exclusively on local produce. Also new is a yoga pavilion sequestered beside a purling stream where Sea's Hawaiian wife, Ka'ale, leads classes in vinyasa and yin yoga.

And there's more to come. "By July, we'll have rebuilt and reopened the old Nihiwatu, including the original restaurant," McBride tells me. "By the end of next year, we'll have built a central spa that connects the two sides of the resort, and there'll be a new beachside restaurant, too. We want to bring everything closer to the water."

If all of this feels entirely divorced from the everyday lives of most Sumbanese, far from it.



The connecting point is the Sumba Foundation. Sumba is among the poorest islands in the Indonesian archipelago and from the start, Graves knew he couldn't in good conscience build a high-end resort without giving something back to the community. By creating a symbiotic connection between Nihiwatu and the foundation, he's been able to develop health, sanitation, and education programs that have improved the lives of thousands of people in West Sumba.

"We'd talk to guests, take them out to the villages, and we discovered that everyone was willing to help, mostly through small donations," Graves recalls. "But we realized quickly that we had to separate the resort project from the foundation."

In 2001 Sean Downs, a wealthy tech entrepreneur, came to Sumba on a surf trip, took a look at the 20-year business plan for social development that the Graveses had created, and promptly decided to co-found the Sumba Foundation with them. "We're already ahead of schedule on that original 20-year plan," Graves says. "You know, even if 100 percent of Nihiwatu's profits went to the foundation, it wouldn't match what we've been able to raise through our guests."

McBride and Graves both acknowledge that the challenge lies in maintaining the soul of Nihiwatu as the number of rooms expands from just 12 to 32 by 2015. "There is no intention to change the ethos," McBride tells me. "We loved the organic feel of the old resort, the proximity to the ocean, it's a key part of the success of this place."

On my final day, I take a stand-up paddling



A cowherd cooling off his buffalo at Nihiwatu Beach. Left: Catch of the day.

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excursion along the Wanukaka River. We float past houses with their distinctive high-peaked roofs of elephant grass. Naked children leap into the water, clambering onto our boards with piratical cries of triumph. We emerge at last as the sun is setting on the very beach where the Pasola kicked off a week earlier.

Graves, whose close relationship with the surrounding communities offers guests unprecedented opportunities to connect with local culture, is ambiguous about Sumba's future. He tells me that investors who've never even visited the island are already land banking ahead of a projected tourism boom. But he also sees opportunity for the islanders. "Sumba is the buzzword on everybody's lips right now. And I definitely feel partly responsible for that, so I'll do what I can to help guide development here. We're going to build a world-class hotel school; new resorts won't have the patience to develop staff. This way, when all the new hotels start arriving in the next five to ten years, it will be the Sumbanese that get the jobs."

As I pack my bags for the short flight back to Bali, I can't help but wonder what the rats would think of all this. Doubtless they've already read the signs. ©



### THE DETAILS WEST SUMBA ESSENTIALS

—GETTING THERE  
The nearest airport is at Tambolaka on Sumba's northeast coast, a 90-minute drive from Nihiwatu (62-361/757-149; nihiwatu.com; from US\$595 per person per night, all-inclusive). Tambolaka is connected to Bali by a four-times-weekly service on Wings Air (lionair.co.id) as well as

by a weekly charter flight organized by Nihiwatu; either way, most inbound visitors will need to spend at least one night in Bali in order to make the onward connection.

—WHEN TO GO  
The Pasola festival is celebrated each year at the start of the planting season, which means March in the Wanukaka area, though dates are only revealed a few weeks before the event.



KINGDOM

IN THE

# CLOUDS

NESTLED HIGH IN THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS, THE TINY REALM OF BHUTAN BECKONS WITH SUBLIME SCENERY, GOOD-NATURED LOCALS, AND REMOTE LUXURY LODGES THAT OFFER AN ALTITUDINOUS ANTIDOTE TO THE COUNTRY'S GRUELING MOUNTAIN ROADS

By CHRISTOPHER P. HILL // *Photographs by* MARTIN WESTLAKE

**BIG-TOWN BHUTAN**

Overlooking the southern approach to Thimpu from Kuensel Phodrang Hill, home to a tenth of the country's population, Thimpu has been the Bhutanese capital since 1961, when it officially replaced Punakha as the seat of government.



“So how do you like your road massage, Ap Chris?” asks my wisecracking guide, Sangay Dorji, as our Hyundai minivan jounces around yet another cliff-hugging bend on the descent from Dochula Pass. Slumped queasily in the back, I barely register the joke before Sangay swivels around, bright-eyed, to deliver the punch line. “Don’t you worry, it’s a complimentary massage. You don’t have to pay, ha ha ha!”

Dapper in a plaid *gho* and clearly unfazed by Bhutan’s vertigo-inducing mountain roads, Sangay has kept us entertained with an arsenal of *bons mots* (“What makes a perfect marriage in Bhutan? The husband should be deaf, the wife should be blind, ha ha ha!”) since picking us up at the airport in Paro the day before. Yet for all his comedic shtick, the 28-year-old also has a remarkable head for local facts and figures, which he rattles off as though channeling Bhutan’s Wikipedia page. And so, zigzagging down the side of a mountain cloaked in alder, cypress, bamboo, and eucalyptus, we learn that Bhutan, a country about the size of Switzerland, covers 38,394 square kilometers. That it is home to 620 species of birds, 46 types of rhododendron, 2,674 glacial lakes, and (at last count) 716,896, people. That almost half of its small but plucky economy derives from hydroelectric projects, which generate 1,500 megawatts of power, most of which is exported to neighboring India. That 72 percent of the

**HIMALAYAN HAVEN**  
Above, from left: An old farmhouse serves as the focal point of Amankora Punakha, with a dining room, library, and areas for meditation; a folk dancer at Amankora Thimpu. Opposite: Breakfast time at Amankora Gangtey.

country is forested. Oh, and that on this dusty, sinuous stretch of road, there’s a curve every nine seconds.

As I mull that statistic, an overloaded and gaily decorated truck rumbles past us on a hairpin bend, the words GOOD LUCK painted on its cab door. I ask Sangay just how much luck we might need.

“Nothing to worry about, Ap Chris. My friend Lekey”—he nods to our intensely focused driver—“is very talented. A real professional. He is the Michael Schumacher of Bhutan! Ha ha ha!”

BHUTAN SEEMS TO REVEL IN ITS remoteness and mystique. The only practical way in and out of the cloistered kingdom is with its sole airline, Drukair, whose fleet consists of just three Airbus jets and a 48-seat turboprop, and whose pilots must undergo rigorous training before tackling the mountain-skimming approach to the Paro Valley. Tourism, which began here only in 1974, is restricted; visitors are required to travel as part of a pre-arranged package or guided tour, a measure designed to keep at bay the hordes of backpackers that have overrun Nepal. There are no traffic lights, no high-rises, no billboards; no Starbucks or KFC outlets. And rather than measuring its prosperity in terms of gross national product, Bhutan, famously, uses a somewhat arcane index called Gross National Happiness, which emphasizes sustainable development alongside cultural and environmental preservation.

For the visitor who can abide the country’s treacherous roads and diabolical cooking, this is all a good thing. Once-feudal Bhutan no longer lives in self-imposed isolation—television and the Internet arrived 14 years ago—but it is still



breathhtakingly exotic, and not just because of the thin Himalayan air. For one, Bhutan is among the last strongholds of Tantric Buddhism, which came across the mountains from Tibet in the seventh century; a palpable vein of spirituality runs through its far-flung communities. For another, there's evocative architecture, from the massive stone citadels known as *dzongs* (part monastery, part town hall) to the half-timbered farmhouses of the countryside. Regulations require that all buildings incorporate vernacular flourishes such as hipped roofs and wood-framed windows, so even towns like Thimpu, the capital, project a medieval aura. There's a dress code as well, which obliges Bhutanese to wear traditional garb in public during daylight hours—the tunic-like *gho* with knee-high socks for men, and for women, a belted dress called a *kira*, fastened with a pair of shoulder brooches over a long-sleeved blouse. It can leave you feeling like you've stepped into a costume drama.

Bhutan is also populated by a generally self-assured, good-natured, and handsome people, epitomized perhaps by their 33-year-old Oxford-educated monarch, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, and his beautiful young queen, Jetsun Pema. Portraits of the royal couple are as ubiquitous as prayer flags. Like his cautiously progressive father, Jigme Singye, who stunned the nation in 2005 with the announcement of his plans to abdicate and to transform Bhutan into a parliamentary democracy, King Khesar is a champion of people's rights, and beloved for it. Often referred to as King Five (being the fifth in a line of hereditary rulers that stretches back a century), he is known for trekking to remote villages to visit his subjects, and for holding candid roadside audiences. He even has a Facebook page.

Bhutan's other ace in the hole is its luxury lodgings. The first of these—Amanresorts' Amankora and the Como group's Uma Paro—opened in Paro in 2004, and have since established sister properties in the Punakha Valley, a five-hour drive to the northeast. India's Taj group runs an elegant 66-room hotel in



If waking up at Amankora Gangtey elicits a certain *déjà vu* (my room, conveniently, is laid out exactly as it was in Thimpu, right down to the light fixtures and wall sockets), the feeling is instantly dispelled by a look out the window at Phobjikha Valley's broad tableau of wetlands and potato fields



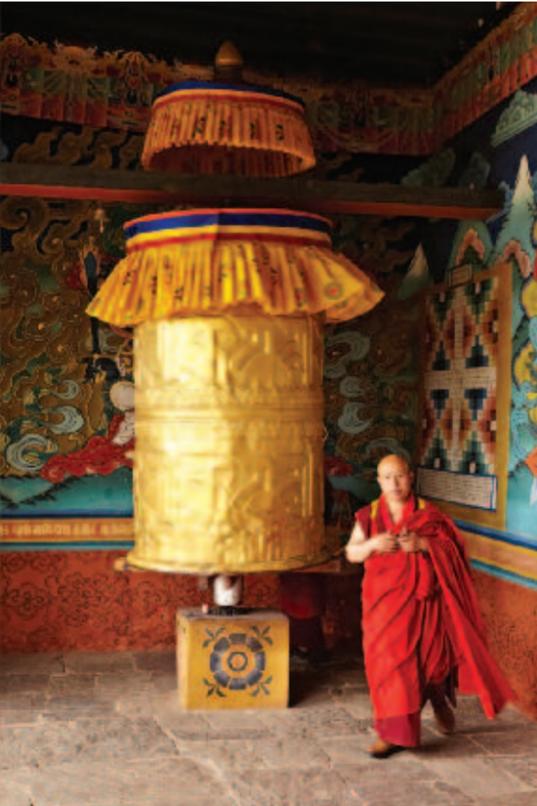
Thimpu. Only Aman, however, went so far as to build an entire circuit of boutique lodges, five in total, each set in a different valley, but all sharing the name Amankora. For those with time and money on their hands, the idea is to experience a chaperoned cross

section of Bhutanese life by circulating among the lodges—*kora* means "pilgrimage" in Bhutan's Dzongkha language. On day one of my trip, that means bunking on the forested slopes above the capital at Amankora Thimpu, where I have my first taste of yak meat (in a toothsome chili-laced sandwich dubbed the Yak Attack) and sleep soundly in a wood-paneled room equipped with a welcome *bukhari* stove and a hot-water bottle.

For the moment, however, we're on our way to the distant Phobjikha Valley, which harbors an eight-suite Aman lodge set atop a piney knoll. Even discounting our pit stops—a leg-stretching break among the chortens at Dochula Pass; a picnic lunch beside a rushing river—it's a long haul from Thimpu, made even longer by heavy roadwork on the final, insanely precipitous leg to Phobjikha. We drive over the crest of the valley in the dark, our headlights picking out the bulky silhouettes of yaks on the roadside. Finally, we pull up to the lodge, where a springy carpet of freshly arranged pine needles leads to a waiting dining room and a much-needed drink of whiskey. Perhaps I'm already succumbing to Bhutan's gross national happiness, because it's never felt better to arrive at a hotel.

**STATE OF GRACE** Above, from left: An employee at Amankora Thimpu; a bedroom in the same lodge; pictures of the royal couple appear everywhere in Bhutan. Opposite: The cliff-hugging Tiger's Nest monastery, high above the floor of the Paro Valley.





**HIGHER CALLING**  
 Clockwise from above: A prayer bell at Punakha Dzong; a corridor leading to guest rooms at Amankora Thimpu; the main lodge building at Amankora Gangtey in the remote Phobjikha Valley.



**FACES AND PLACES**  
 Clockwise from below: Sybaritic touches in a suite at Amankora Punakha include terrazzo-clad tubs; a shop owner in Gangtey village; a courtyard at the grand Punakha Dzong; on a trail in Punakha.





IF WAKING UP AT AMANKORA GANGTEY elicits a certain *déjà vu* (my room, conveniently, is laid out exactly as it was in Thimpu, right down to the light fixtures and wall sockets), the feeling is instantly dispelled by a look out the window. Phobjikha Valley, 3,000 meters above sea level, is a broad tableau of wetlands and potato fields dotted by stout whitewashed farmhouses. On a ridge overlooking the lodge is the Gangtey Goemba, a 16th-century monastery that we tour after breakfast, following Sangay around the flagstone courtyard in a clockwise circumambulation of the *goemba's* keep-like prayer hall. The valley's main attraction, however, is its black-necked cranes, a few hundred of which fly in from Tibet each October to winter here. So after leaving the monastery, Sangay takes us through the adjacent village and down a trail bordered by blue pines and dwarf bamboo. We walk for about 40 minutes along the edge of the valley, spotting only one other person, an old woman balancing a stack of pine needles on her head (Sangay sheepishly explains that the needles are mixed with cow dung to make manure). Then we crouch down on a juniper-scented hummock to watch a flock of cranes from a respectful distance.

"The cranes are a gift," says the lodge's charming young assistant manager, Jigme Tenzin, as we dine that night on pork dumplings and pumpkin curry in a stone potato shed owned by an adjacent farm. "And because of them, this valley is protected, which is why you won't see any telephone or power lines." Lit only by dozens of flickering candles and heated by a portable bukhari stove, the shed—empty of potatoes at this time of year—is both eerie and magical, and strikes me as the ideal place for telling ghost stories. Instead, Jigme talks about local customs, including a venerable but fast-fading courtship ritual known as "night hunting." Accordingly, a young man will make arrangements with a girl for what is basically a consensual one-night stand, then sneak into her parents' house that night to consummate

Surrounded by rice fields and stands of fruit trees on a small hill, Amankora Punakha is centered on a stately old farmhouse leased from the royal family. Accessing it is half the fun: guests must cross a wood-planked suspension bridge that stretches across the Mo River, to be greeted on the other side by a waiting buggy

next day that we pile back into the Hyundai for the drive to the Punakha Valley, covering much of the same ground as the previous day's journey. But instead of turning up toward Dochula Pass, we follow the jade-green Punatshang River north, past the soot-blackened ruins of Wangdue Phodrang Dzong, which was razed by fire last summer. "This was our third-oldest dzong," Sangay says in an uncharacteristically grave tone. "Very sad."

He brightens, though, when I ask him about all the penises—pink, tumescent, blushing graphic—I've seen painted on farmhouse walls. The tradition, he says, dates back at least five centuries, to when a bawdy Tibetan lama named Drukpa Kunely—a.k.a. "the Divine Madman"—crossed the mountains into Bhutan and proceeded to "tame" demons by batting them with his own prodigious you-know-what. "It is called the *dorji*, which means 'thunderbolt,' but it also means that other thing," Sangay explains. CONTINUED ON PG. 130

**LOCAL COLOR** Chilies are the hallmark of Bhutan's fiery cuisine; a doorway to a study chamber at Gangtey Goemba, a 16th century monastery overlooking the Phobjikha Valley. Opposite: Amanresorts guide Sangay Dorji in a courtyard at Paro Dzong.

the deal. If he leaves before the parents catch him, he is under no obligation to marry her.

"And if he does want to marry the girl?" I ask.

"He stays for breakfast."

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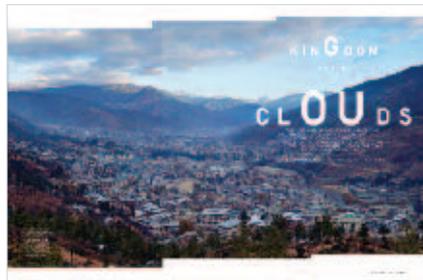
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**DestinAsian**  
FROM ASIA TO THE WORLD



## BHUTAN

CONTINUED FROM PG. 119



He adds with a wink, “Same as my last name, ha ha ha!”

The road eventually brings us past Punakha Dzong, which presides over the confluence of two rivers, and on to Amankora Punakha. Surrounded by rice fields and stands of fruit trees on a small hill, the lodge is centered on a stately old farmhouse leased from the royal family. Accessing it is half the fun: guests must cross the creaking wooden planks of a suspension bridge that stretches across the trout-filled Mo River, to be greeted on the other side by a waiting buggy.

The rest of the afternoon is spent devouring a barbecue lunch between sips of Chilean wine and touring the frescoed prayer halls of Punakha Dzong, whose crepuscular chambers reverberate with the chanting of monks and the haunting skirl of their oboe-like *jalings*. My favorite moment, however, comes at cocktail hour. In the lodge’s darkened courtyard, I join some other guests for what has been billed as a traditional Bhutanese welcome. Staving off the chill with woolen blankets and cups of hot *aragrice* wine stirred with yak butter (it’s vile, but warming), we watch as an extended family of folk from a nearby farm dance and sing their way jauntily around a bonfire. Every so often a gust of wind rains sparks on granddad or daughter-in-law or a child wrapped in a

pint-size gho, but round and round they go, clapping and twirling to an ancient rhythm.

And sure, it’s a hotel entertainment. But deep in the valleys of Bhutan, even scripted moments can seem utterly authentic.

I SPEND MY LAST FULL day in Paro, where Amanresorts built its first Bhutanese lodge. Getting there takes us back over Dochula Pass and through Thimpu, another marathon drive along serpentine roads broken only by the two-kilometer stretch of asphalt that parallels the runway at Paro—the only straight road in Bhutan, Sangay tells me with an equally straight face.

Like its sibling lodges, the 24-room Amankora Paro has a discreet, clean-lined aesthetic that deftly balances rustic materials (rammed-earth walls, lime-washed stone, corrugated-tin roofs) against such indulgent features as terrazzo-encased bathtubs and big pillowy beds. It’s set amid a forest of blue pine above the village of Balakha; Mount Jhomolhari, a 7,300-meter summit, is visible from the windows of the lodge’s reception pavilion. But the view that most people come here for is that of the Takstang (“Tiger’s Nest”) Monastery, perched on a cliff face high above the floor of the Paro Valley. This is arguably Bhutan’s most photographed landmark, and the two-hour hike up to it is meant to be the crescendo of our visit.

But I give the Tiger’s Nest a miss. Sore from being on the road and woozy from the altitude, I opt instead for a long alfresco soak in a hot-stone bath at Amankora’s spa. And so my final afternoon in Bhutan doesn’t see me scurrying up a mountainside, but rather wreathed in herb-scented mist in a wooden tub on the edge of a fern-fringed glade. And yes, I’m feeling very happy. ☺



### THE DETAILS BHUTAN ORBUST

#### —GETTING THERE

At an elevation of 2,200 meters, Paro Airport is the entry point to Bhutan. **Drukair** ([drukair.com .bt](http://drukair.com.bt)) flies there from Delhi, Kathmandu, Kolkata, Bangkok, and—as of September 2012—Singapore. Visa applications must be made in advance through a tour operator and you must travel as part of a tour group or under the auspices of a hotel.

#### —WHERE TO STAY

Suites at all five of the lodges on the **Amankora** ([amanresorts.com](http://amanresorts.com)) circuit are priced from US\$775 per night per person, based on double occupancy, which includes all meals, house beverages, laundry, and airport transfers. Guests staying a minimum of seven nights will get complimentary use of a private vehicle with driver and guide. Note: foreign visitors are not permitted to drive in Bhutan.



# ON SAFARI IN SRI LANKA

VENTURING DEEP INTO THE FORESTS OF YALA AND WILPATTU PAYS OFF WITH SIGHTINGS OF SLOTH BEARS, ELEPHANTS, SPOTTED DEER, AND THE KINGS OF THE SRI LANKAN JUNGLE—LEOPARDS  
By CYNTHIA ROSENFELD  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALVARO LEIVA

**INTO THE WILD**  
On a game drive in southeast Sri Lanka's Yala National Park, the most visited wildlife reserve on the island and your best bet for spotting a Sri Lankan leopard.



**PARK PLACE**  
Clockwise from left: Heading out of Leopard Safaris' Yala camp; binoculars at the ready in Wilpattu National Park; one of Wilpattu's unknown number of Sri Lankan leopards; an egg curry from the Yala camp's kitchen; essential camp gear; lunchtime in Yala; an elephant spotted in the same park.



## My first safari adventure in Sri Lanka

begins with a mishap—just not the sort of mishap I'd have expected in the wilds of the island's southeast, where elephants, sloth bears, buffalo, and leopards roam. At some point during the short jeep ride from the entrance of Yala National Park to the camp I'm bound for, my suitcase, a large and well-traveled Tumi, rolls off the back of the vehicle. Neither myself nor my host, Noel Rodrigo, hears it go thump in the gathering twilight, so engrossed are we (me listening, him talking) in his tales of game drives and crocodile encounters.

A wildlife sanctuary since 1900, Yala is the second largest of Sri Lanka's 20 or so national parks, comprising nearly a thousand square kilometers of monsoon forests, grassland, and coastal wetlands. It's also the most visited, being just a couple hours' drive east of Galle and its surrounding tourist beaches. Ease of access has come at a price: reading up on Yala before my trip, I came across reports of "jeep jams" and

"marauding behavior by drivers and tourists" and altogether too many vehicles (as many as 600 a day) entering the park, a situation that has alarmed conservationists.

"Nothing is being done to protect the animals and too many young boys are driving tourists in the park without a license," Noel confirms over drinks at the camp, having dispatched a team of guides to recover my lost luggage. "But there is no better place to see leopards in the wild. Besides, we know a few tricks for avoiding the masses."

By "we" he means Leopard Safaris, the company he founded in 2006 and that now operates camps on the edge of Yala and three other national parks: Wilpattu, Uda Walawe, and the Knuckles Forest Reserve, in the mountains northeast of Kandy. I'm here because a friend in Colombo tells me that Noel, a former Sri Lankan Airlines cabin manager, not only offers a modestly luxurious setup, but that he is also my best bet for seeing an endangered Sri Lankan leopard (called *kotiya* in Sinhalese and

*chiruththai* in Tamil), of which there are an estimated 55 living in Yala.

I get my first taste of what creature comforts await sitting around a campfire that first night, the flames casting flickering shadows across the surrounding scrub. Noel's wife, a German named Cecile, has made some scrumptious chicken-liver pâté, which sets us up for a barbecue dinner of fresh Negombo prawns, pork chops, and garlicky baked potatoes. As we eat, Noel clicks through a laptop slideshow of the resident leopards, which again is so engrossing that I barely notice when the guides return triumphant with my Tumi. And then it's time to zip myself into my South African canvas tent, which is surprisingly cool inside and outfitted with a comfy, linen-draped queen-size bed and a snugly blanket. It's only 9 p.m., but Noel wants us to get our rest. One of his tricks for avoiding the marauding masses is a very early start.

"DO YOU HEAR THAT? Those are deer alarm calls. There's a leopard

and somewhere nearby." Noel is pointing into the predawn gloom as his foot pushes down on the gas pedal.

"Be like a statue if we see one," he adds as we drive deeper into Yala, well ahead of the crowds. "The first 10 to 15 seconds are crucial so we don't scare him off."

Fear does not belong to the first animal we meet, however, but to me, as we come eye to trunk with a large male tusker in our path. The elephant makes a series of mock charges at the jeep before vanishing into the bush. Noel is unflustered by the display. Me, I'm frazzled, but thrilled at the same time.

My heart rate drops back to normal as we drive along. A few spotted deer cross our path. Crocodiles slither in and out of water holes. A black-headed oriole flies past, one of about 150 bird species at Yala, and is quickly followed by a blue-tailed bee-eater then a bluish-green starling. Eventually some other jeeps pass us, and we stop to help one



It doesn't take Withanage long to spot a large male leopard lounging on a high branch once we've reentered the park that afternoon. We observe the big cat from a discreet distance, but our commune with nature is short-lived; within minutes, other safari vehicles begin to arrive

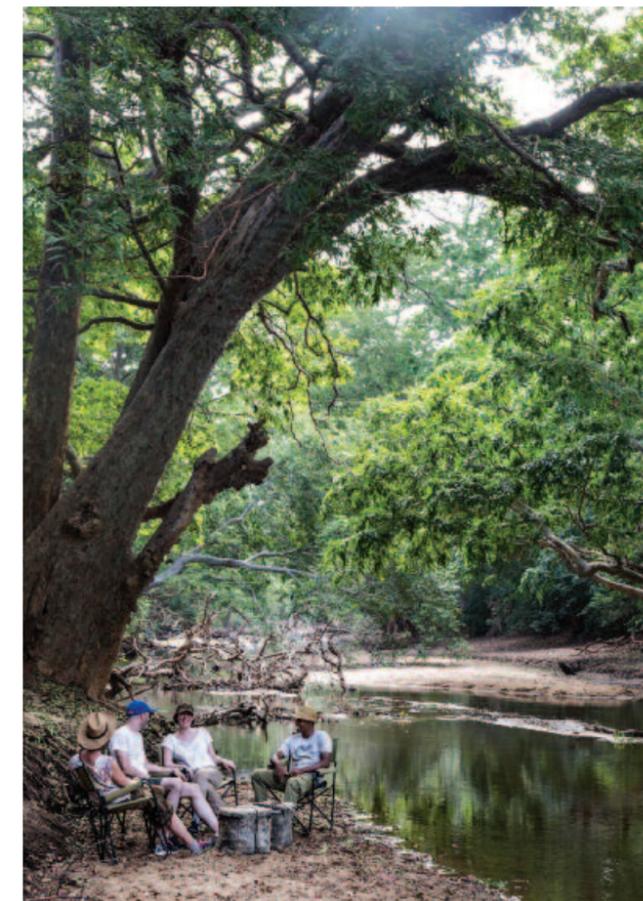
that gets stuck in the mud. But even this fails to distract me from studying the sandy earth for animal tracks and listening for deer alarm calls.

We drive on through the Jurassic landscape until a gap between two giant boulders reveals the Indian Ocean. A pair of white-bellied sea eagles traces circles in the sky above. We also spot a carefree group of deer at play, which delights me, until Noel points out that this can only mean there are no leopards in the vicinity. Still, I'm happy just driving around and soaking up the views until he says it's time for lunch. We head back to camp for my favorite Sri Lankan dish, *kottu roti*, made of chicken, vegetables, and flatbread finely chopped together.

My second drive is with Noel's camp manager and naturalist, Sajith Withanage. It doesn't take him long to spot a big male leopard lounging on a high branch once we've reentered the park that afternoon. We observe the big cat from a discreet distance, but our commune with

**SHADED CUSTOMERS**

Guests relaxing between wildlife sightings beside a stream in Yala National Park, below. Opposite, from top: One of the company's customized safari vehicles on a forest track in Wilpattu; Sajith Withanage, Leopard Safaris' camp manager and naturalist.



nature is short-lived. As our sighting is along a well-used road, there is no keeping it a secret. Within minutes, other vehicles begin to arrive. Withanage says we should move on or risk getting stuck in one of those jeep jams I read about. As he navigates away from the impending melee, he promises that I'll "feel freer to enjoy the whole environment now too." He's right. With that would-we-or-won't-we-spot-a-leopard question out of the way, my eyes roam across the park's mostly untouched landscape of low-lying lakes. Kingfishers, Indian pond herons, and a Malabar pied hornbill perched in treetops overhead. Withanage points to where an elephant is almost completely obscured by a stand of trees; all we can see is its trunk curving greedily around some quivering branches. More deer prance past us even after we drive out of the park gates, but I hardly notice: I'm too busy e-mailing Noel to book my next Leopard Safari, at Wilpattu National Park up north.

**S**

ix months later, I've returned to Sri Lanka in order to spend my birthday on safari, this time in a park that, for now at least, has been spared the jeep jams. Wilpattu, the largest national park in the country, was off-limits for 16 years during Sri Lanka's protracted civil war, and only reopened a few years ago. And while the Tamil Tigers are gone now, they have yet to be replaced by the tourist hordes, leaving nature as unspoiled as anyone could wish.

"Elephants may come to drink by the stream in front of your room," Noel tells me as he walks me to my

tent. "Don't run or scream if you see one." Without any particular conviction, I promise to do neither.

I'm traveling lighter this time, and once my knapsack is zipped into my canvas tent, we drive up the road to the park's gates, passing emerald rice paddies and bungalows painted happy hues of violet, orange, and pink. Located 180 kilometers due north of Colombo, Wilpattu means "Place of Lakes" in Tamil, a reference to the more than 40 lakes and water holes found within its vast perimeter. It's along those shores that Noel says we'll encounter the most wildlife, and I plan to record each and every sighting in my notebook. Wilpattu also proves to be more densely forested than Yala, though poaching is said to be more prevalent; the deer herds we spot don't seem quite as numerous as they were down south.

Still, my notebook quickly fills up: crocodiles, a bright blue kingfisher, barking deer, monitor lizards. As it's my birthday trip, Noel lends me his fancy Swarovski binoculars, through which I immediately spot a great egret in the distance. This is followed by a serpent eagle and a crested hawk eagle, Noel identifying each one as it flies into sight. Then an indigo-winged butterfly flutters past. Scribbling constantly now, my eyes are darting from page to sky to treetops: a pair of common emerald doves; four black-headed ibis and dozens of hornbills; a white-breasted kingfisher and a common bee-eater with uncommonly vibrant blue and orange feathers; countless jungle fowl. And that's just the first two hours.

The bird life is certainly dazzling in Wilpattu, but I begin to worry that I might not see anything bigger. I needn't have. We return to the park that afternoon with Noel's wife along for the ride. In no time, Cecile spots a mama sloth bear with a cub in tow. "So black they look blue," I jot down as the shaggy creatures, frolic together at the edge of a dense tangle of tree roots and branches.

We return to camp and find a cocktail bar CONTINUED ON PG. 130



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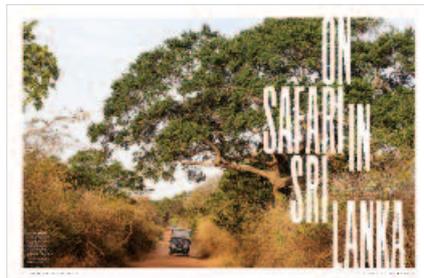
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## SRILANKA

CONTINUED FROM PG. 119



set up under the jungle canopy, which is almost as welcome as a hot shower complete with Ayurvedic soap. Refreshed, I join the crew for a candlelit dinner of prawn curry and string hoppers, a local starch. Noel says that ours was one of only 10 safari jeeps in the park that day. I take that happy bit of news with me back to my tent, and, after satisfying myself that there is no thirsty elephant lurking outside, promptly fall asleep.

THE 5 A.M. WAKE-UP call comes all too soon, and half an hour later the breeze is whipping through my hair as we cruise once more into Wilpattu. Noel pulls out a map and explains that we will drive 55 kilometers across the park to start at Kudiramalai Point, on Wilpattu's westernmost perimeter, where we're unlikely to be bothered by any other vehicles.

Before the sun comes up, we've already seen two large sambar deer, as well as gray herons, water hens, more crocodiles, woodpeckers, an orange-breasted green pigeon, a white-bellied drongo, and two types of hornbill. But it's a leopard that I'm keen to see, and by mid-morning, we still haven't found one.

Sensing my frustration, Noel pulls off the road and we breakfast on fresh fruit and croissants by a lily-filled lake. It's an enchanting scene, and my mood improves with each bite. "When you spot a leopard," Noel says, "and you *will* spot one, just tell me calmly, and don't point, as this might scare him off."

Bellies full, our fortunes seem to improve. Just before 10 a.m. we come upon a single bull elephant drinking from Thala Wila Lake, a broad expanse of water filled with pink flowers that Noel calls "horsefly's eyes." The elephant has managed to cover himself in wet blossoms from trunk to wrinkly backside. Delighted, I scribble in my notebook: "Today I am seeing pink elephants."

Soon after, I do exactly what I was told not to do and call out "There, I see a leopard!" with my arm snapping out uncontrollably in the animal's direction. It's a quick sighting—the big cat dashes across the path in front of us and disappears into the undergrowth. But I've

officially seen my first Wilpattu leopard, and after so many hours of looking for one, I feel an elation akin to opening a tableful of birthday presents.

Our picnic lunch unfolds on the bank of a slow-moving river. After devouring a heaping plate of kottu roti washed down with an ice-cold Lion beer, I scribble in my notebook about "my" leopard like a teenage girl with her first crush. Yet it's not the only cat we see that day. Toward the end of the afternoon, we're all watching quietly as a muscular male peeks out from the bush and saunters back and forth along the path behind us for a good five minutes. He's looking directly at us when a female darts by so fast that I only catch sight of her spotted tail. Our male follows her out of sight. "Definitely a mating pair," Noel tells me as we linger alone in the afterglow of the encounter.

Soon we're racing back across the ruddy landscape to reach the park gates before their 6:30 p.m. closing, all of us pleasantly exhausted from a full day in the bush. But Wilpattu grants me one more birthday gift, in the form of a large sloth bear. His Fluffiness scampers out on the plain ahead of us, where he rolls around on the grass before walking languidly back into the woods. Notebook now full, I settle into my seat for the ride back to camp. ☺



### THE DETAILS SRI LANKAN SAFARI

—GETTING THERE  
Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport is served by most major regional carriers.

—WHERE TO STAY  
In the Sri Lankan capital between safari outings, check into **Casa Colombo** (231 Galle Rd.; 94-11/452-0130; [casacolombo.com](http://casacolombo.com); doubles from US\$250), a 200-year-old Moorish

mansion that has been lovingly converted into a 12-suite hotel.

WHAT TO DO  
**Leopard Safaris** ([leopardsafaris.com](http://leopardsafaris.com); from US\$400 per adult per night) runs regular camp excursions in Yala and Wilpattu year-round, hosting up to 15 people at a time. Its other two eco-friendly campsites—in Uda Walawe and the Knuckles Mountains—are available only on special request.

# JAK ART A

FOR ALL ITS URBAN SPRAWL AND CONGESTED STREETS, THE INDONESIAN CAPITAL HAS EMERGED AS ONE OF THE REGION'S MOST DYNAMIC METROPOLISES, WITH A RAPIDLY RISING SKYLINE, GLEAMING SHOPPING PLAZAS, AND A NEW BREED OF DESIGN-SAVVY RESTAURANTS AND BARS. ISN'T IT TIME YOU PAID A VISIT?

BY **LAWRENCE OSBORNE**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MUHAMMAD FADLI

# MOD ERN

**JAVANESE**  
Opposite: Indonesian "tapas" at Jakarta's newest five-star hotel, Keraton at the Plaza, which takes its name and inspiration from the historic sultans' palaces of Java.





**MONUMENTAL MOMENT**

Fun and games in the plaza surrounding the Monumen Nasional, a 132-meter flame-crowned obelisk that rises above Taman Merdeka ("Freedom Square") in the center of town. Opposite: Javanese antiques add to the atmosphere at restaurant Lara Djonggrang.



ONE NIGHT, MY SECOND IN A CITY I DIDN'T KNOW AT ALL, I WAS SITTING AT THE 365 ECO BAR IN KEMANG SIPPING A LONG DRINK CALLED, WITHOUT IRONY, AN "ILLUSION." THE PLACE WAS EMPTY, UNCHARACTERISTICALLY ONE MIGHT ASSUME, AND WITH ITS CORRUGATED ROOFING AND STEEL TRUSSES IT FELT LIKE

a tiny aircraft hanger after all the planes have left. Out in the sultry night, a strange mist or haze had fallen, and up on the main road girls done up like parakeets staggered home through lines of slowly closing clubs. It was long after 1 a.m. At the bar, I recognized an Australian from my nearby hotel—one of those up-at-night businessmen with jet-lag who seem to know all the cities of the world.

"First time in the Big Mango?" he asked, after telling me that he loved the Zombies at Eco Bar.

"I live in Bangkok," I said, "and Bangkok is the Big Mango, not Jakarta."

"Oh, right mate. This one's the Big Durian. They're all some kind of big fruit."

I told him it was indeed my first trip and that I had no idea where I was. Jakarta, the biggest metropolis in Southeast Asia, is home to more than 10 million people, a number that almost triples if you include everyone living in the greater metropolitan area. It sprawls across a flat alluvial plain on the northeast coast of Java, with little in the way of natural features to help you get your bearings. Nor does it have the media-fed familiarity of Bangkok, which attracts far, far more visitors. Jakarta thus remained—to me, anyway—more enigmatic, more enticing. I had decided to just plunge in and see what it was like.

"It's a wild crazy place, mate," said my red-faced companion. "I wouldn't just plunge in if I were you. I wouldn't do it."

He then began to tell me of his previous trips to the Indonesian capital: the drug-fueled "business" parties and the nightmare traffic; the raucous visits to the Stadium disco and the bars around Blok M; the expense-account binges at Dragonfly; the smog and the stifling *kampung*s (inner-city villages) and the sundry shadowy oil men. And, above all, the incomprehensible scale and chaos of the place.

The usual clichés, in other words.

"So you hate it?" I asked.

He seemed nonplussed by the question. "I wouldn't say hate exactly," he muttered. "Love-hate, maybe. Sixty percent hate. But there's the forty percent that you love, you know—god knows why. Maybe it's because I'm always confused here. You never get to the end of the confusion."

Confusion, it is true, can be seductive. Most big Asian cities have

this elusive quality, which sets them apart from the orderly and programed nature of their Western equivalents. I was, of course, familiar with it from years of living in Bangkok. But Jakarta seemed at once to take this sweet confusion to a very different level. I had expected, perhaps, a vestige of Dutch colonial neatness, or at least of the postcolonial city planning of the 1950s and '60s. And these two things do exist in Jakarta, especially the nationalist grandeur of the urban visions of Sukarno, Indonesia's first president. A civil engineer by training, Sukarno launched a monumental building spree meant to transform Jakarta from a colonial backwater to a showpiece of Indonesia's arrival as a modern, dynamic nation: multilane boulevards; a 100,000-seat sports stadium; Modernist land-

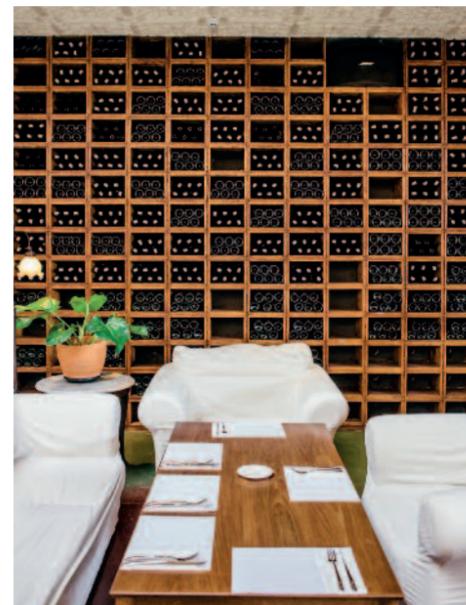
marks such as the massive Istiqlal state mosque and Hotel Indonesia; and the Monumen Nasional (Monas), a 132-meter-tall obelisk that juts symbolically—if not phallically—from the center of Taman Merdeka, the ceremonial square originally laid down by the Dutch in the early 19th century. But confusion seems to have come crashing in since those distant days. Even the Monas now feels like something from a distant, half-forgotten past. And the even older past—of the Dutch city of Batavia, with its graceful colonnades and Javanese *limasan* roofs—barely survives at all.

As I walked around Kemang during my first few nights, I wondered how old this South Jakarta neighborhood of winding lanes, little bars, and soaring condo towers might be. The towers were more glacially imposing and lofty than anything even in Bangkok. But there were also innumerable corners where guys stood around barbershops and two-bit drinking holes with jukeboxes and *warung* night food. There were 24-hour dim sum depots, and hookah joints, and pubs and clubs with terraces where girls in punk leather sat about with expressions of sly expectation—as if the night they were prowling through could bring surprises. There were pet shops and smart furniture boutiques (long since closed for the day), and sidewalks crammed with hipster locals and expat kids looking for fun. All of this gives Kemang an idiosyncratic vibe and cosmopolitan intimacy that seems entirely new to the city's topography. And yet one can, with a little sweat, walk from 365 Eco Bar to a century-old mosque, and even within a single street one can pass (or so it feels) between decades.

Even far beyond Kemang, however, it felt to me that Jakarta is no longer content to be a sprawling mass of skyscrapers, fetid canals, and gridlocks, of commercial amnesia and anonymous architectural gigantism. Although neighborhoods like Kemang are admittedly few and far between, there is a new and fresh yearning for cosmopolitan elegance and pleasurable refinement in the air, a growing sophistication

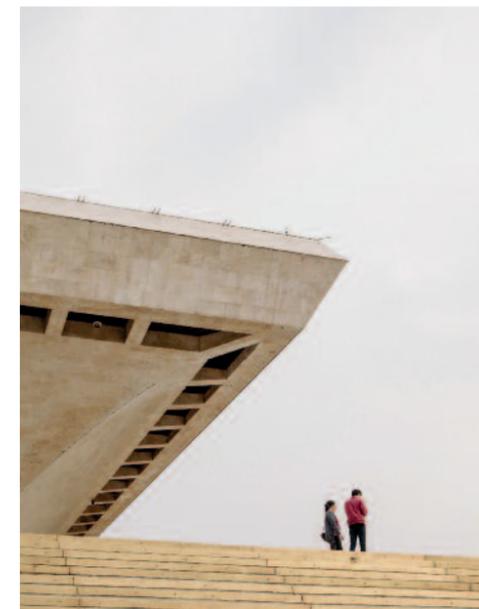


THERE IS A FRESH YEARNING FOR COSMOPOLITAN ELEGANCE AND PLEASURABLE REFINEMENT IN THE AIR, A GROWING SOPHISTICATION THAT ONE CAN FEEL THROUGHOUT THE TONIER PARTS OF THE CITY



JAKARTA GEMS

Clockwise from top left: *Bebek betutu* (Balinese-style duck) with condiments at Lara Djonggrang; one of the city's ubiquitous fleet of three-wheeled *bajaj* taxis; setting tables at the latest outpost of Australian chef Luke Mangan's Salt Grill chain, located on the 46th floor of a downtown skyscraper; overlooking the nearby Hotel Indonesia traffic circle; at the base of the Monumen Nasional; Jakarta has a thriving street-art scene; inside a suite at Keraton at The Plaza; cushy seating at Potato Head Garage.





**SHUTTER TO THINK**  
A *soto mie* (noodle soup) vendor in the Old Town area around Fatahillah Square, which once served as the administrative hub of the Dutch East Indies. Opposite: Blue swimmer crab cake with mesclun salad and beef tartare with fries, from the appetizer menu at Potato Head Garage.



## I GOT ADDICTED TO EXPLORING THE RABBIT'S WARREN OF ROOMS AT LARA DJONGGRANG AND EATING SATAY ON STICKS INSERTED INTO A HUGE CONCH SHELL. IT FELT LIKE THE HOUSE OF SOME WEALTHY JAVANESE AUNT



that one can feel throughout the tonier parts of the city. Where is all the money coming from? I wonder. Probably best not to ask. But wealth there is; according to a report by real estate firm Jones Lang LaSalle, Jakarta is one of the fastest-growing property markets in Asia.

The city is converging with the other great cities of its region. As trade grows with Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Bangkok, Jakarta's landscapes, social pleasures, habitudes, and sins come increasingly to resemble theirs. Christopher Koch's 1978 novel *The Year of Living Dangerously*, about the turmoil of the 1965 coup attempt, now seems as distantly historical as the building in which many of its scenes were set, Hotel Indonesia. And yet the past still hovers within Jakarta—barely perceptible sometimes, but quietly present all the same.

IT'S A SLIGHTLY STRANGE EXPERIENCE walking around Hotel Indonesia today; the property was closed for a four-year overhaul in 2004 and is now managed in sleek style by the Kempinski group. After my sojourn in Kemang, I moved to the Grand Hyatt next door, and from time to time I'd stroll over and wander through its renovated halls, perhaps hoping for a glimpse of the hotel that Koch described as riding "like a luxury ship in mid-ocean . . . With its restaurants, nightclubs, bars, swimming pool, and shops, it was a world complete. It was also majestically expensive, but heat or gastritis usually broke the resolve of those transients who tried the decaying colonial hotels of the Old City." Back then, Hotel Indonesia, with its 14-story guest wing, was the tallest building in the city; today, it is dwarfed by its neighbors. On the first floor is a gallery devoted to the paintings of artists popular in the 1960s and '70s—pieces like *Djatayu Fights Ramayana for Princess Sinta* by Basuki Abdullah and *Meeting in Bali* by Alimin, which portrays three Balinese girls in Gauguinesque poses with flowers in their hair. It is nostalgic and folkloric in mood, but this room of local masters is the only vestige left in the hotel of that earlier era—a time that most Jakartans, I suspect, are happy to forget.

Which is not to say that forward-looking Jakarta is entirely shunning its past. Nearby, in the leafy old-money residential neighborhood of Menteng, not far from where U.S. President Barack Obama attended elementary school in the late '60s, a much older structure, lately rechristened the Tugu Kunstkring Paleis, is done up like some grand Javanese salon circa 1914, the year the building was inaugurated.

Originally designed by the Dutch architect P.A.J. Mooijen as the home of the Batavia Art Circle before becoming an immigration office in the 1950s and, more recently, an ill-fated outpost of French lounge chain Buddha Bar (which was forced to close in the wake of protests by religious groups), the Kunstkring is now run by the Tugu hotel and restaurant group, who have returned it to its proper vocation again, as both an art gallery and fine-dining restaurant. Set under twin octagonal towers, the various rooms now shine with carved Javanese doorways, ornately carved mirrors, and period furnishings, while the menu is strong on old-style *Indonesische* dishes.

It's a similar scene at other Tugu restaurants in the city, particularly Dapur Babah and Lara Djonggrang. Both are stuffed with antiques

and bric-a-brac according to a historical theme (Peranakan in the case of the former; imperial Java in the latter)—a gesture that might come across as kitsch in a different city, but which in Jakarta fills a curious void, for between the humble warung and the five-star international dining scene Indonesian food had for a long time gotten a little lost. Indeed, during my visit I got somewhat addicted to exploring the fabulously decorated rabbit's warren of rooms at Lara Djonggrang and eating satay on sticks inserted into a huge conch shell. It felt like the house of some wealthy Javanese aunt whose staff had just made dinner, a home away from home. And that note of affluent domesticity is what a huge and chaotic city needs.

A JAVANESE AESTHETIC ALSO informs the design of Jakarta's newest five-star hotel, but in a resolutely contemporary setting. Tucked behind the Plaza Indonesia shopping mall, the Keraton at the Plaza, where I spent a blissful night, takes its name from the old sultans' palaces of Java, and dazzles you upon arrival in the lobby with a soaring wall of batik-patterned metalwork. Its ground floor is like a private club whose back door opens—via a long passageway—into Plaza Indonesia, and its lounge has the quiet pace of a library studded with antiques. The hotel's integration into a mall would be strange anywhere else, but Plaza Indonesia is a part of Jakarta's public space; and indeed the interconnection between all the properties around the CBD feels both natural and eccentrically inevitable now.

Each day, as I would not do in Bangkok, I wandered out from the Keraton into the mall and pored through the outlets of Hunting World and Charles & Keith until I reached a strange Japanese chocolate store called Maqui's where, as ephemeral (and edible) souvenirs, I bought chocolate bars shaped as tools, as spanners, wrenches, screwdrivers. When your mall has a chocolate outlet from Kobe selling candy spanners, your city has truly "arrived." One could say the same, moreover, of high-altitude bars and restaurants, those lofty gastronomic perches that nearly all Southeast Asian cities now boast. Jakarta has been somewhat tardy in this regard, but is catching up fast: last year saw the opening of Skye on the top of a 56-story bank tower in the CBD, while Altitude, a sleek three-in-one restaurant venture occupying the entire 46th floor of another nearby skyscraper, opened just weeks before my April visit.

I ate one lunch at Altitude's Salt Grill, the domain of Australian chef Luke Mangan, and then poked my nose into the adjacent Italian and Japanese dining rooms. It seemed like a bold move, all in all, to open such a concentration of expensive eateries 160 meters above the earth and to put a wine cellar and cigar lounge at their core. The scale and commitment were impressive.

Later, I asked art collector and restaurateur Ronald Akili, whose latest venture is a 2,000-square-meter steakhouse and bar called Potato Head Garage, if the money was there to make it all work.

"Jakarta is definitely transforming itself into a major metropolitan city in Southeast Asia," he said. "Over the past couple of years the hospitality industry has expanding rapidly. We have new restaurants opening almost every month, and some major five-star hotels on the way. The recent boom in commodities has put a lot of new wealth flowing through the city, and people are spending more of their income on entertainment and leisure."

The food at Salt Grill is worldly and subtle, and dining there close to the windows one feels the unique, crackling

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**BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY**  
Clockwise from above left: The entrance to Tugu Kunstkring Paleis, a colonial-era landmark turned art gallery and restaurant; an antique mask at Lara Djonggrang; a neon-lit street corner in the Kemang neighborhood; Lara Djonggrang's mixed satay presentation; Tugu Kunstkring Paleis seen from across its front lawn; waiting for the lunchtime rush at Salt Grill; the 56th-floor terrace at Skye; Skye's bar area.



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## JAKARTA

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immensity of the city. On a clear day, there's even a glimpse of volcanic mountains in the blue distance, and of the hazy expanse of the Java Sea to the north, where the container cranes of Tanjung Priok Port bristle along a woefully industrialized shoreline. At night, from here or from the breezy rooftop terrace at Skye, one sees the long, glittering ribbons of traffic stretching to the horizon. The benefit of altitude is serenity, perspective. The beauty of Jakarta lies in its scale, its very enormity. That scale is not just a burden and a hassle. It affords the city space and a strange kind of majesty.

But of course, Jakarta is not so serene at ground level. When I asked Mea Panigoro, one

of Jakarta's top musical producers, whether it was an easy city to live in, she was distinctly amused. "Some say if you can make it in New York you can make it anywhere. Well, try Jakarta. If you can make it *here*, you definitely can make it anywhere. Including the moon."

One night, out of curiosity, I made my way to the Stadium in Kota and I did so as late as I could bear. On many a hoary expat forum—and in many a conversation with travelers—this is the night spot touted with a winking eye and a knowing nudge as something to do with the "real" Jakarta. Sure enough, the prancing horse statue was there, leaping out of the facade under a spotlight, and the many floors of nonstop entertainment were heaving away to hip-hop, trance, deep-house. On the smoky, stifling landings the girls and the johns and the gawpers were all there as they have been for years. But I had an iced coffee in the ground floor lobby among the gladiator outfits and I noticed that everyone there was Indonesian. The foreigners appeared to have moved on elsewhere, thus rendering all that winking advice anachronistic. So quickly does the city change its habits that even its nocturnal escapades change social complexion faster

### —TABLE TALK THRE NOT-TO-MISS JAKARTA RESTAURANTS

**Potato Head Garage** Twenty-five-meter-tall theater curtains and a lofty pyramidal ceiling set the stage for the biggest addition to Jakarta's restaurant scene in recent years. With 2,000 square meters of concrete floor space, Potato Head Garage feels like a vast banquet hall, though one strewn with white-covered sofas and armchairs and centered on a horseshoe bar with an old Russian church altar at one end. The menu has a similar sense of scale to it, with starters such as tuna tartare and an instantly addictive blue swimmer crab cake in green curry sauce leading to a raft of house specialties, none better than the full-blood Wagyu steaks from Australia's Blackmore Farm—the beautifully marbled beef is grilled over rambutan wood and presented with sauces like yuzu-chili and bone-marrow butter. Come cocktail hour, when the soundtrack shifts from big band and swing to retro rock, order the signature mojito (made

with sugar cane) or ginger-and-lychee martini, and by all means consider dessert: a Brazilian tres leches with Grand Marnier ensures your visit will end on a sweet note (*Sudirman Central Business District, Lot 14, Jl. Jenderal Sudirman; 62-21/5797-3330; pttgarage.com*).

**Eastern & Oriental** Having made a name for himself in Bali with his Southeast Asian-inspired restaurants Sarong and Mamasan, chef Will Meyrick has brought his successful recipe to the big city in the form of this months-old—and already wildly successful—venture. The menu at Eastern & Oriental puts the emphasis on Thai and Vietnamese dishes, with standouts including chicken betel-leaf wraps, stir-fried mud crabs with chili sauce and steamed buns, *kaeng phet* curry with roasted duck and lychee, and *massaman* curry with slow-braised lamb. The signature cocktails here stray a little further from the traditional but local ingredients remain the focus. Creations include the Thai Ice Tea Flip, which blends

and cinnamon; and the E&O Tom Yum on the Rocks, a mix of lemongrass, coconut liquor, lychee, and kaffir lime leaves (*Jl. Dr. Ide Anak Agung Gde Agung; 62-21/2902-3418; eandojakarta.com*).

**Altitude** Located almost 160 meters above ground, Altitude combines three different restaurants with a fully stocked bar and lounge, but for diners this translates to an abundance of choices. Good luck deciding between Salt Grill by Australian celebrity chef Luke Mangan, which offers his signature dishes like crab omelet and enoki mushroom salad with miso broth; Gaia, a beautifully appointed northern Italian eatery that makes its own pasta including a whole-wheat stracci served with wild boar in a red-wine sauce; and Enmaru, a branch of the much-lauded Japanese *izakaya* chain that is now bringing seafood directly from the famed Tsukiji Market to Jakarta (46/F, *The Plaza, Jl. MH Thamrin; 62-21/2992-2448; altitude.co.id*)



Tugu Kunstkring Paleis.

than any rumor can pinpoint.

After an hour at Stadium I moved on to Jalan Jaksa—Jakarta's anemic answer to Khao San Road in Bangkok—and the Obama Fans Club bar, where they were hosting a Papuan Ladies Night. Never on any of my frequent for-



### THE DETAILS JAKARTA

**—GETTING THERE** Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta International Airport is serviced by all major regional carriers, including **Thai Airways** ([thaiairways.com](http://thaiairways.com)), **Malaysian Airlines** ([malaysiaairlines.com](http://malaysiaairlines.com)), and of course national flag carrier **Garuda Indonesia** ([garuda-indonesia.com](http://garuda-indonesia.com)).

**—WHERE TO STAY** The lush grounds at the **Four Seasons Jakarta** (Jl. H.R. Rasuna Said; 62-21/252-3456; [fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com); doubles from US\$289)

combined with the soft earth tones and understated opulence of its 320 guest rooms make for a great escape from the hustle and bustle of the city. A new addition to Jakarta's luxury hotel scene, the 140-room **Keraton at the Plaza** (Jl. M.H. Thamrin No. 15; 62-21/5068-0000; [starwoodhotels.com](http://starwoodhotels.com); doubles from US\$295) lives up to its name—*keraton* means palace in Javanese—with 24-hour butler service, state-of-the-art electronics, and floor-to-ceiling windows for expansive views of the city. And just down the street from the Keraton

is one of the city's largest luxury hotels, the **Grand Hyatt Jakarta** (Jl. M.H. Thamrin Kav. 28-30; 62-21/2992-1234; [jakarta.grand.hyatt.com](http://jakarta.grand.hyatt.com); doubles from US\$320). The hotel has 428 rooms and suites located above one of Jakarta's best malls and is just across the street from Hotel Indonesia and the Grand Indonesia shopping complex.

In South Jakarta, the **Grand Kemang** (2H Jl. Kemang Raya; 62-21/719-4121; [mesahotelsandresorts.com](http://mesahotelsandresorts.com); doubles from US\$160) offers sleek accommodation on the doorstep of Jakarta's liveliest neighborhood. **The Dharmawangsa** (Jalan Brawijaya; 62-21/725-8181; [thedharmawangsa.com](http://thedharmawangsa.com); doubles from US\$390), in the nearby residential area of Kebayoran Baru, is another standout, with an elegant, old-world ambience channeled through a classical Javanese aesthetic.

**—WHERE TO DINE** Apart from the trio of restaurants spotlighted on the opposite page, be sure to visit **Lara**

ays to Papua had I ever witnessed a Papuan Ladies Night, but it was a reminder that Jakarta is the capital of one of the largest and most variegated nations on earth. On a street nearby, I huddled down among the *roti* vendors and satay stalls and *kaki lima* carts for a bowl of *ketoprak*. An assemblage of moist rice cakes, tofu, beansprouts, and fragrant peanut sauce, it's a street food to rival anything in Bangkok.

Like many cities, Jakarta comes into its own at night. The sweltering boulevards and kampungs, the wilted jacarandas and soot-stained overpasses transform into a vast and secretive playground, a honeycomb of pleasure chambers that its people know how to operate with charm and an off-hand skill. The city is, as its citizens continually complain, too big; its infrastructure woefully inadequate; one sometimes cannot fathom how 28 million people coexist on a single waterlogged plain. But Jakarta was a joy to visit, and a surprise to boot—the Big Durian it may be, but like that most odoriferous of Asian fruits, its tough-looking exterior gives way to a complexly textured experience within. ☺

**Djonggrang** (Jl. Teuku Cik Di Tiro 4; 62-21/315-3252; [tuguhotels.com](http://tuguhotels.com)) and sister establishment **Tugu Kunstkring Paleis** (Jl. Teuku Umar 1; 62-21/390-0899; [tuguhotels.com](http://tuguhotels.com)) for Indonesian dishes presented in antiques-strewn surrounds.

**Moovina** (3/F, Plaza Indonesia, Jl. M.H. Thamrin; 62-21/2992-4567; [moovina.com](http://moovina.com)) is split into two dining concepts: a casual French bistro with a flower shop below, and a sleek lounge above. Head to **Skye** (56/F, Jl. M.H. Thamrin No. 1; 62-21/2358-6996; [ismaya.com](http://ismaya.com)) for bird's-eye views of the city from either its grill-centric dining room or breezy cocktail lounge; if ground-level people-watching is more your thing, bistro-bar **Loewy** (Jl. Lingkar Mega Kuningan; 62-21/2554-2378; [loewyjakarta.com](http://loewyjakarta.com)) won't disappoint. As the night progresses, head to the **Dragonfly** (Graha BIP, 23 Jl. Gatot Subroto; 62-21/520-6789; [ismaya.com](http://ismaya.com)), one of Jakarta's poshest clubs.



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