

REMARKABLE MEDAN

BY SIMON PITCHFORTH PHOTOS BY JAN DEKKER

Medan is the capital of the Indonesian province of North Sumatra and is the country's third-largest city. The city's plains were used in the 16th and 17th centuries as a battlefield in a scrap between the kingdoms of Aceh and Deli and the word *medan* translates as 'field' or 'battlefield'. According to the diary of a Portuguese merchant in the early 16th century however, the name Medan is actually derived from the holy Arab city of Medina. During the 19th century, Medan became an important trading post and the city grew quickly as rich tobacco plantation owners moved in.



Simply Sumatra

(From left to right) Bustling downtown Medan, Medan's Mesjid Raya.



Nowadays, Medan is a large and sprawling city with a population of around 2.5 million. At first glance, Medan often strikes visitors from Jakarta as a place that exemplifies all of the Indonesian capital's negative qualities. Medan is hot, humid and dusty and full of traffic jams, pollution and poverty. However, despite being a bit dog-eared around the edges, Medan is steeped in history and contains many points of interest.

Moreover, as with many Indonesian cities, the real deal comes when you head out of town and start to explore the beauty and majesty of the surrounding countryside. Medan is particularly well blessed in this respect and lies a two or three hour drive away from some of Indonesia's most celebrated rural tourist spots.

Firstly, and most famously, the clear waters of Toba, Southeast Asia's largest lake, and its beautiful surrounding countryside make for a great holiday. The Toba area is also home to the Batak people, one of Indonesia's most fascinating and distinctive ethnic groups. Another worthwhile visit is the hill town of Berastagi, which offers a cool climate, cultural charm and, above all, some excellent hill and volcano hiking. Finally (for this feature at least) Bukit Lawang sits on the easternmost tip of Sumatra's huge Gunung Leuser National Park and contains both roaring rivers to raft down and huge swathes of dense jungle to trek through. Bukit Lawang is most famous though for being one of the most accessible places in which to spot orangutans in the wild and a sizeable population of these fascinating creatures still swings through the trees here.

Anyway folks, let's return to Medan for a moment and use it as our starting point for a quick tour around this fascinating region of Indonesia.

Medan

Medan is a sprawling city that clusters around the Deli and Babura rivers. A taxi from Polonia airport into town should set you back around Rp.50,000. If you fancy a day's exploring, why not take a walk around the city or, alternatively, save your legs and take a spin in one of the city's unique, smoke belching, three wheeled, motorised *becak*.

Medan is chock-full of Dutch colonial architecture and many of these old buildings are still in use. Medan's City Hall, central Post Office, Water Tower (the city's best-known architectural icon) and the Titi Gantung railway bridge all make for great photo opportunities.

Medan's Mesjid Raya (Grand Mosque) can be found in the centre of town on the corner of Jl. Mesjid Raya and Jl. SM Raja. This unusual Moroccan style building was erected by the Sultan in 1906 and features Italian marble, Chinese stained glass and many ornate carvings. Just around the corner from the mosque you'll find the somewhat dilapidated Istana Maimoon (Maimoon Palace). The palace was built by the Sultan of Deli in 1888 and the current Sultan still lives there.



Museum wise, the **Museum of North Sumatra** over on Jl. HM Joni houses a large collection of Sumatran artifacts, including some fascinating stone carvings from Nias. More architectural ghosts of Medan's colonial past can be found along **Jl. Ahmad Yani** starting from **Jl. Palang Merah** and heading north to **Lapangan Merdeka**. **Lapangan Merdeka** itself is a former parade ground surrounded by beautiful old art deco buildings. If you're after something a little more culturally contemporary then why not pop along to the **Tondi Gallery** at **Jl. Keladi Buntu No.6** for a modern art fix.

Further out of town, **Hill Park at Green Hill City Sibolangit** (0628 97610/97054) lies an hour's drive from the downtown area and features plenty of funfair rides, entertainments, cafes and restaurants. A visit to the park makes a really nice day out for the kids. Alternatively, the **Pantai Cermin Theme Park** (061 797 0277) lies on the coast 40 minutes from town and is a water park featuring slides, pools, jet skis and plenty more besides.

If you're feeling peckish after all that, rest

assured that Medan's healthy ethnic mix of Batak, Chinese, Javanese, Minangkabau, Mandailing and even Indian peoples will ensure a tasty meal.

Tip Top Restaurant (061 4532042 – 4514442) at **Jl. Ahmad Yani 92**, was at one time the place to eat and dates right back to colonial times. The nostalgic flavours of ox tongue sandwich and Dutch bitterballen can be ordered from a very sweet little typewriter printed menu that seems to have been caught in a time warp. **Bollywood Food Centre** (061 453 6494) over at **Jl. Muara Takus No.7** serves up spicy Indian food and various Malay-Indian roti shops are also located nearby. Vegetarians who are getting sick of the *gado gado* diet should head to **Sumatera Vegetarian Restaurant** (061 415 8852) at **Jl. Gatot Subroto 35**. The city's many large hotels house a wealth of dining options and Jakarta residents may also be interested to learn that Italian favourite **Trattoria** (061 4515166) has opened a new branch at **Jl. Uskup Agung No.17**.

After dark, the new and hip **Cava Lounge** (061 453 3166) is perhaps the slinkiest bar

Medan Mixture

(From left to right, clockwise) The city features sumptuous colonial architecture galore, beautiful Lake Toba, The Aryaduta Hotel Medan.

in town and a great place in which to enjoy a few cocktails. Alternatively, the **Shoot Pool Lounge and Sports Bar** (061 453 1884) over on **Jl. Kapten Pattimura** features live big-screen sports action plus pool, live music and DJs. **The Tavern** in the now somewhat aged **Hotel Danau Toba** (061 415 7000) over at **Jl. Imam Bonjol 17** remains a popular nightspot.

PLACES TO STAY

Medan contains many large hotels including the **Hotel Garuda Plaza** (061 736 1111), the **Hotel Deli River** (061 703 2965), and the new **City International Hotel at Sun Yat Sen** (061 736 3479), which is currently the highest building in Medan. The also brand new and impressively huge **JW Marriott** (061 455 3333) is the first five-star hotel to hit town.

The Aryaduta Hotel Medan
Jl. Kapten Maulana Lubis No. 8.
Tel: 061 457 2999

The Aryaduta Hotel opened in Medan in November 2007. It is strategically located in the centre of the business and government district, as well as the shopping area. The hotel is also close to Polonia International Airport, which is only a 15 minute drive away. Step into The Sky Lobby on the 9th floor and enjoy a completely different ambience, away from the bustle of the city below.

The Aryaduta's 200 elegant and minimalist rooms are divided into Deluxe, Aryaduta Club, Aryaduta Pool Terrace, Aryaduta Premiere, Family Premiere, Business Suite and Aryaduta





Suite. All rooms are fully equipped with five star standard facilities such as 26" or larger LCD flat screen TV, exclusive amenities set and free high speed broadband internet access. Guests can also enjoy the resort style swimming pool view or scenic views of the city. The Kitchen Restaurant features a range of sumptuous fare ranging from Japanese to European and the Aryaduta Hotel Medan also features extensive conference facilities that utilise state of the art audio and visual technologies. Make your stay in town a relaxing one!

Medan celebrates its 419th birthday on July 1st and many celebrations are planned, so now would be a great time for a Sumatra session. Happy holidays!

Lake Toba

A three hour drive from Medan, Toba is the largest lake in Southeast Asia and covers a simply enormous area of 1707 square kilometres. Sitting in the middle of this massive expanse of water sits **Pulau Samosir** (Samosir Island) which is almost as large as Singapore! The lake was formed by an absolutely gargantuan volcanic eruption some 70,000 years ago and sits in what is

the largest caldera on earth. In fact, you'd probably have to head into outer space to actually get a good view of this enormous, dormant, fire breather, such is its size.

Samosir Island and the Toba area in general are the spiritual and cultural homes of Indonesia's mainly Christian Batak population, one of the country's most vibrant and friendly ethnic groups. Toba used to be a very popular tourist destination in times past, although the number of arrivals has dwindled in more recent years. This means, however, that there are no crowds at the lake, prices are cheap and that friendly locals are grateful for your custom. Formerly on the beaten tourist track, Toba and Samosir are now well off it and thus worth a visit if you're looking for a relaxing break.

The friendly, music loving Bataks and the volcanically warm, clear waters of the lake itself, which is set amid a backdrop of breathtaking mountain scenery, should prove to be food for the soul. Ferries run every hour over to the hotels and guesthouses that crowd sections of the Samosir coast at **Tuk Tuk**. The lakeside town of **Parapat** is the ferry terminal and the place to head for upon leaving Medan.

When you reach Samosir itself, why not rent a bicycle or a motorcycle and take a tour of the island? The scenery is superb, there's

hardly any traffic and there are many pretty places in which to stop off and take a quick dip in the lake's soothing waters.

At **Panururan**, on the island's western side, you'll find some bubbling hot springs to enjoy whilst at **Simanindo**, there's a Batak Museum that puts on regular traditional dance performances. Alternatively, why not head out of the main Tuk Tuk area up to the mountain waterfall behind. It's a lovely stroll and there's a refreshing swim waiting for you at the end.

PLACES TO STAY

Most of the island's guesthouses and restaurants are located on Samosir's Tuk Tuk peninsular and one can easily slip into the lake's clear waters from virtually all of them. **Carolina Hotel** (0625 45120) is a good bet and has 49 rooms set in a lush tropical garden. Luxury rooms come with hot water, a bath tub and a fridge. **Tabo Cottages** (0625 451 318) is probably the best accommodation on the island has to offer and features clean and modern rooms, an Internet connection and Western-style food. Tabo is a popular choice with expatriates looking for a quick break from Jakarta or Medan. Tuk Tuk is liberally dotted with many other small guesthouses too. Take your pick, check in and chill out!



Berastagi

Situated at a cool altitude of 1300m up in the hills, around two hours from downtown Medan, Berastagi makes for a great two or three day retreat. This bustling town boasts a healthy agricultural economy and its markets are usually interesting hives of activity. Berastagi's real attraction, however, is its mountain trekking. The area is dominated by the twin volcanoes of **Gunung Sinabung** to the west and **Gunung Sibayak** to the north. Both of these easily accessible volcanoes are a day's hike a piece and are surrounded by lush forests and wildlife. After you've tramped up Sibayak, why not recharge your batteries at the hot springs on the main road?

Sinabung, at 2450m, is even higher than Sibayak and offers even more stunning views from its summit. You may wish to consider taking a local guide with you on this one though as it can be a little tricky at times! Buses run around the bases of both of these behemoths, so getting straight onto the hiking trails is relatively easy. The rest of this area, known as the **Karo Highlands**, is also worth exploring and features traditional villages and Batak architecture aplenty.

Back in Berastagi, the colourful **Tugu Perjuangan** (Combat Memorial) is located in the centre of town and commemorates the Batak's struggle against the Dutch in the 1800s. When you've seen that, why not try some beetle nut at the market? The leaves, paste, tobacco and red nut are all purchased

together, mixed on the leaf, rolled and chewed. The paste also contains lime for a little added kick. If you're feeling even more adventurous, snake, lizard and dog meat can all be found on Berastagi's menus!

PLACES TO STAY

Hotel International Sibayak (0628 91301) is perhaps the best in town and features wooden floors and generous beds. Alternatively, **Berastagi Cottages** (0628 91345 or 91456) over at Jl. Gundaling No.65, is a nice, quiet out-of-town option and has great garden views.

Bukit Lawang

Also three hours from Medan, **Bukit Lawang** lies at the southernmost tip of Sumatra's huge 950,000 hectare **Gunung Leuser National Park** (literally, "Door to the Hills"). The jungles and huge rivers in this area make it simply great for some equatorial rainforest trekking.

Bukit Lawang's most famous attractions, however, are the **orangutans** living there. In 1973, a Swiss organisation set up a rehabilitation centre that aims to reintroduce these hairy quadrupeds (close cousins of *Homo sapiens* of course) back into the wild after periods in captivity. The park's rangers gradually nurse orangutans back to the jungle and the centre has become a popular

tourist attraction over the years. The **Gunung Leuser National Park** is one of the orangutans last remaining strongholds and over 5000 animals are thought to be living in the area's dense jungles.

As well as orangutan spotting and jungle trekking, it's also possible to raft down **Bukit Lawang's** wide, fast flowing rivers. Tractor inner tubes are rented out on the river banks to brave 'tubers'.

Alas, in November 2003, a flash flood hit the area, the result of illegal logging upstream. A 20 metre high tidal wave destroyed 400 houses, 3 mosques, 8 bridges, 280 kiosks and 35 guesthouses, as well as taking 239 lives. Thankfully, **Bukit Lawang** has been fully rehabilitated in the wake of this tragedy and there are many pleasant guesthouses and restaurants in the area.

In addition to orangutans, gibbons, monkeys, toucans, snakes and monitor lizards all prowl the park ready for the spotting. Overall, **Bukit Lawang** offers perhaps Indonesia's most easily doable jungle holiday.

PLACES TO STAY

Bukit Lawang has a number of guesthouses in which to stay. **Bukit Lawang Eco Lodge** (081 260 799 83) offers the village's most upmarket accommodation and has a series of hotel style rooms set in the forest. The lodge grows its own produce for use in its pleasant restaurant, which overlooks the river. Alternatively, **Jungle Inn** (no phone number!) is situated at the park entrance, directly opposite the orangutan sanctuary, and features lovely scenic views of a waterfall, a rock face and the jungle itself. **Noras Homestay & Restaurant** (0813 6207 06561) is also worth a look. Go and meet the kings of the swingers!

Medan escape routes

(From top to bottom) Vibrant Berastagi, raw rapids at **Bukit Lawang**.

