

# West Sumatra: Cradle of Minangkabau Culture

By Vesna Dramusic



A rumah gadang ('big house'), the traditional Minangkabau structure

In November 2008, we travelled to Sumatra, known for its lush rainforests, exotic flora and fauna, cascading rivers, sparkling crater lakes, shimmering white sand beaches and diverse array of ethnic groups who inhabit some of the most spectacular volcanic landscapes in the world.

We explored the culture of the skilled and business-savvy Minangkabau craftspeople of West Sumatra. The Minangkabau are one of only three matrilineal Islamic cultures and the largest matrilineal culture in the world. Lineage is traced through the mothers and loyalty is to the grandmother's clan house; property and wealth descend through the female line. Clan leaders are the matriarch grandmother, her female heirs and her eldest brother. Property cannot be sold without clan consent. Although men are involved in managing communal property, women retain the rights of use and ownership, so their social status is very high. Women joke that if a husband misbehaves, the wife will place his shoes outside the front door, thus announcing that divorce is pending! When a woman is ready to marry, she pays a groom price to the female members of the prospective husband's family. After the wedding, the man 'visits' his wife in her home, but in the morning returns to work his mother's fields. His sisters' children are his responsibility, whilst his own are raised by his wife's brother. Men work the fields while women manage the longhouses. In Minangkabau philosophy, the sexes are complementary, exemplified in the saying, "skin and nail act together to form the fingertip".

Legend says that the Minangkabau people descended from Alexander the Great's wandering hordes. Anthropologists, however, believe they arrived from the Malay Peninsula between 1000-2000 BC, settling this

fertile island with valleys ideal for wet rice cultivation and domesticating buffalo to help work the paddy fields. Even if they don't have Alexander's bloodlines, the Minangkabau possess his wanderlust, energy and creativity. They encourage young men to experience merantau ('to know about being without'), to travel the world and seek their fortunes. This rite of passage has helped them develop keen trading skills and an entrepreneurial spirit. Thus only five million Minangkabau live in West Sumatra, but nearly 50 million are scattered throughout Indonesia and the world. The men send home money to support mosques, ceremonies and the longhouses that remain a source of cultural pride.

We had not a single dull moment. After leaving the airport in Padang, we ran smack into an incredible traffic jam. It was the final two days of the Hari Raya holidays with hordes of people travelling in all directions on the narrow roads. We joined them, hoping to reach Bukittinggi in the normal time of two hours. Unfortunately, we set a 'record' of seven hours for 79 kilometres, spent mainly in first gear or at a complete standstill. Whilst inching along, Lim Chey Cheng presented her talk on *rumah gadang* ('big house'), the traditional Minangkabau structure, sitting on wooden piles three metres off the ground. The spectacular, upturned rooflines resemble water buffalo horns shooting impressively skyward, creating stunning contrasts to paddy fields in glowing shades of green. Normally more than 20 metres long, carved with bas-relief motifs and painted in vibrant colours, the houses serve as residence, family meeting hall and are also for ceremonial activities. While passing through a small town, it was as if Chey Cheng had waved a magic wand. One after another, houses with striking roofs, each more beautiful than the one



*The FOM Sumatra study tour group*

before, seemed to float into view as we proceeded on our enchanted carpet ride through the verdant rice-terraced Anai valley.

When we reached the Anai plateau, 930 metres above sea level, we stopped at Pandai Sikat, famous for its expert weavers who specialise in reproducing traditional motifs and designs. We particularly wanted to meet a renowned 85-year-old weaver, but alas, she was in hospital. Nevertheless, we were privileged to see her exquisite *songkets*, woven in beautiful and complex gold and silver patterns, which no one else makes today. Her home was a treasure trove of old wedding headgear, antique *kris*es, carved cupboards and incredible textiles that none of us could resist buying.

Brilliant sunshine on the second day enhanced the natural beauty of Bukittinggi, a town blessed with friendly people, enveloped in cool mountain air and surrounded by the frequently active volcanic peaks of Gunung (Mount) Merapi, which greeted us with billowing smoke. All around, we heard the delicate clip, clop of trotting horses, a local transportation system of charmingly costumed ponies pulling colourful carts. Below the town was the fairytale beauty of Ngarai Sianok, the 'Grand Canyon of Indonesia', a park whose topography changes often, thanks to frequent earthquakes. Downhill was a busy market with a profusion of large fresh fish, fruits, sweets and vegetables; a veritable explosion of colours and a virtual paradise for our group's photographers.

What a burst of adrenaline we had as we headed west along the famous 44 serpentine curves of the narrow road

down Ngarai Sianok Canyon to Lake Maninjau. The serenity of the lake and its surroundings, with Minangkabau houses, paddy fields, forests and hills, made us want to return for family holidays and adventures on the lake. When we later reached the Harau Valley and went on foot into Belimbing Village, we lost ourselves in the rural tranquillity and beauty of the endless rice fields. Many Minangkabau houses, complete with buffalo-horn-shaped spires, were still in use, people busy with their daily work, kids playing football. When it started to rain, we ended our day in a big Minangkabau communal house learning about their traditional life-style, the rain providing a lulling background to a vanishing world's tranquillity.

More adrenaline shots and lots of laughter accompanied us back to Padang, the busy capital. We had planned to reach the Minangkabau Museum before its five o'clock closing. The traffic jam was so bad, however, that we began jumping off the bus to take photos, going into shops to use the toilets, poking into embroidery shops. Then, in a twist of fate, the police cleared the jam ahead of us, seemingly in seconds. With all the cars now let loose, the bus took off quickly, leaving six people behind! Two kilometres later our driver managed to pull off the road to await our 'marathon runners' who pursued us with impressive speed over a course that included railroad tracks and numerous other obstacles. Among great smiles of relief, they finally re-boarded the bus. We reached the museum after seven o'clock, but luckily the guard, who lives at the museum, agreed to reopen it for us. Built in 1990, the museum aims to preserve Minangkabau culture and history. We learned that the Minangkabau have the highest literacy rate in Indonesia and play vital roles in Indonesian political, intellectual and economic development. In a basement gallery, a recreated wedding room contained a beautiful collection of bridal attire that we soon donned, instigating another photographic frenzy.

All good things must end, as did our trip, but not before we concluded that the greatest experience of all was our group of 16 women functioning like an amicable, well-tuned Minangkabau family with leader Chris McLennan being the gently efficient matriarch.

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*Photos by Anne-Marie Schmid*



*In Sumatra the mountains are surrounded by rain forests and frequently active volcanic peaks*