



Temple Town

Buddhist and Hindu architecture and motifs dot the charming Yogyakarta in predominantly Muslim Indonesia

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I've lost count of the number of places I have visited that promised so much in their tourist brochures, but signally failed to live up to the wow factor when I actually got there. So, with all the depressing news hitting the tourism sector over the past few months, it is refreshing to find one tourist attraction that not only appears to be bucking the trend of the worldwide economic downturn, but actually lives up to all the hype surrounding it.

Yogyakarta — Indonesia's third largest city, whose fortunes are largely dependent on tourism — has just about everything a tourist could possibly ask for. Beautiful scenery, culture in abundance, fascinating museums, unspoiled beaches, shopping with a difference, restaurants that are guaranteed to make you forget your waistline... what more could one ask?

The region is probably best known for its wealth of Buddhist and Hindu temples, most notably Borobudur — the world's largest (and many would argue the most beautiful) Buddhist temple, decorated with 2,672 relief panels and 504 Buddha statues. It has been described as an epic scripted in stone and is the single-most visited tourist attraction in Indonesia, constructed in eight layers, the first five of which are

square terraces with sculpted walls showing scenes from Buddhist mythology. The topmost layers are circular and each has a ring of bell-shaped stupas (Buddhist shrines). Pilgrims would walk through some five kilometres of passages and stairways before reaching the summit. The design was meant to depict the structure of the Universe with man's progression through life towards Nirvana.

Borobudur dates back to the 8th and 9th centuries, but was abandoned following the 14th-century decline of Buddhist and Hindu kingdoms in Java and the subsequent conversion to Islam. It lay hidden for centuries under layers of volcanic ash and jungle growth until in 1814, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the then British ruler of Java, was told of its location by native Indonesians. Since then the temple has been preserved through several restorations, the largest undertaken between 1975 and 1982 by the Indonesian government and UNESCO, following which the monument was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1991.

The other must-see attraction is Prambanan's Hindu temples — a compound 17 kms east of Yogyakarta, and the biggest temple complex in Java. There are 224 temples altogether, with three on the central terrace at up to 47 metres high dominating the complex. The inner wall of the balustrade features scenes from the *Ramayana*.

Yogyakarta city itself is known as a centre of classical Javanese fine art and culture with batik, silver work, ballet, drama, music, poetry and Wayang puppet shows much in evidence. It is also known for its gamelan music, which developed in the courts, as well as for being a haven for underground art. It is home to many indie filmmaking communities, indie musicians, performance artists and visual artists.

At the city's centre is the Kraton, or Sultan's palace — a walled city within a city with luxurious pavilions dating back to the 18th century and in which the current Sultan still resides. It is filled with richly decorated reception buildings, wedding carriages and a vast array of memorabilia documenting the sultan's life.

While the city sprawls in all directions from the Kraton, Jalan Malioboro with its row upon row of street vendors and malls is the primary shopping street for tourists. It is always crowded and is particularly famous for its night street food-culture. Many tourist shops and cheap hotels are concentrated along this street. Here too you can find traditional horse-pulled carts, known as *andong*, which wait for tourists outside hotspots like the train station and the Kraton. Furious haggling is expected and you can easily bring the quoted price down by at least half.

Parangtritis Beach, a seaside resort 27 km south of Yogyakarta on the Indian Ocean, is one of the better known beaches. To get there you travel through breathtaking scenery. The beach — with dark volcanic sand — is surrounded by jungle clinging to the mountains; but its enormous waves and currents are known to be extremely dangerous. There are, however, many other beaches with white sand which are perfectly safe.

Visitors from the UAE will find that with current exchange rates, they get an enormous amount of Indonesian rupiah to the dirham with the result that prices appear very low.

With all its breathtaking scenery, staggeringly beautiful attractions and with so much to do and see, Yogyakarta should surely be on everyone's must-visit wish list.

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UNLIMITED OFFERS: Scenes from Yogyakarta



Photos: photolibary.com



* THREE MINUTE CITY México City: Colours & Flavours

One of the most popular tourist destinations in Latin America, México City offers a plethora of options for any discerning traveller to choose from: sunny beaches, archaeological zones and adventure trails. The Mexican culture is a colourful reflection of the pre-Hispanic and 300 year Spanish colonialisation period — you can enjoy

listening to the beats of traditional music such as *Banda* and *Ranchera*. The Chapultepec Palace and the city's churches showcase architectural splendour, and the city's rich art history — depicted through the works of Frida Kahlo and Juan O'Gorman — are displayed at the Palace of Fine Arts and the Mexican National Palace.

PARTY
Mama Rumba in Roma has live shows and belts out original salsa music till 3 am.

EAT
Mole Poblano is a favourite — a fusion of 15 ingredients, from chillies to chocolate sauce.

SEE
A potpourri of historic sites — Bellas Artes Palace and the Museo Nacional De Arte are must-sees.

STAY
The Sheraton Hotel Alameda, set in a historically significant locale, with great service to boot.

* CLICK SPOTTED!

Virtual travel advice seems to be popping up at a rate faster than most travellers can keep up with. So, it is not surprising that young 20-somethings just pack their bags and head off to the mountains with everything else but practical travel tips. Travel site www.wherescool.com is a virtual dopest of sorts with info on neighbourhood record shops, dive bars, underground local attractions and all that your mother's travel catalogue would never say. www.wherescool.com

Welcome to adult camping. Suddenly, you realise that camping can still be fun when you have crossed your forties — when someone tells you that you can hunt ghosts or spar like a gladiator on a campsite. Adult camps are a huge hit now among travellers who are encouraged to live out their dreams and do anything from live gigs in rock and roll camps to any other quirky, kiddie fancy. So, who says camps are for kids? www.campsearch.com

