



The only country where they boast their national sport is 'bargaining', which is sprawled across the crowded markets, endowed with a mahogany perfume filling the already humid air. We carelessly watch people live their lives, as they wander past and look up at us with their opaque eyes and smiles from ear to ear. They go out of their way to make themselves known to us, firing questions from all directions - "Halo Jon, wearr yoo go?", "Have you married?" and so forth. As a westerner (*bule*), this, among many other things, came as a huge shock to us. Indeed, how wrong we were!

Myself and 14 other eager students, most of whom had never been overseas before, were a little skeptical traveling to Indonesia, especially after the things we had been warned about by

the media to 'reconsider travel'. But those four credit points just seemed too easy, especially in the short space of six weeks. Little did I know, at the end of the program, when tears formed beads across my brow, they were the best six weeks of my life. Easily.

Home, to the local ethnic group of Minangkabau, found us at Universitas Negeri Padang (UNP). A University situated on a busy street, encompassing magnificent architectural roofs, motor cycles racing the streets and groups of people chain smoking clove cigarettes, wearing long pants and jumpers under the sweltering sun.

UNP classroom hours ran from Monday to Friday, as we dragged ourselves out of bed at 7:30am to have a cold *mandi* before class began at 8.00am and finished at 12 noon. Yet the odd occasion of a religious holiday was the norm, where students actively took part in absorbing its religious significance. The atmosphere in the classroom was more than expected, being a small group our teachers grew strong ties with each student. In the final week of the program, students had elevated their reading, writing and most importantly speaking skills (thanks to the consistent teachers) to a level beyond what can be learnt simply on campus at Deakin.

Students keenly participated in several field trips and cultural activities conducted on Wednesday afternoons and weekends, ranging from watching cleverly trained monkeys pick coconuts in Padang Panjang; actively playing traditional Indonesia sports with sticks and swords; carefully practicing forms of traditional Minangkabau dance (performed at our graduation ceremony in traditional clothing); right through to the groups favourite, the infamous 'bukit..bukit sepuluh ribu'. Bukittinggi is the home of the magnificent Danau Maninjau, and its 44 corner walk from the its peak descending to its foot.

On a final note, before the tissues go back...

I feel very strongly about the saying "to see is to believe", particularly when visiting a less privileged country like Indonesia for the first time. No matter what you have learnt beforehand; the words in textbooks, the sounds on the radio, the images on TV, they do no justice for the real thing of actually being in the country one has truly put so much study into, to really appreciate the Indonesian society of how people live and who they are.

When I speak for myself, I speak for the group - it was a remarkable experience that will truly never be forgotten.

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