

WHEN THE TOURISTS DESERT

By Oakley Brooks

A GUIDEBOOK FROM A few years ago portrayed the Shangri La Resort, on the shores of Indonesia's Lake Toba, as one of those prized, quiet, tucked-away jewels. But on the night my wife and I arrived, it looked abandoned. Hopping gingerly down a long, crumbling set of concrete stairs, I found the family of three that owned and ran the place; they had apparently closed up for the night at dinner time, content that my phone call to reserve a place had just been a tease, like so many others these days. "A lot of people call and never come," said the round-faced, twenty-something son in simple Indonesian. They seemed stunned, not knowing what to do with us. I finally convinced his younger sister to sweep out one of the cottages in a darkened, empty row along the lakefront, and we hauled our stuff down the steps.

We had escaped here to the North Sumatran highlands and the storied lands of the Batak people to get out of the heat and incessant Ramadan prayer calls in our temporary home in nearby Aceh. But after ferrying across the lake to the once-famous destination of Samosir Island, our salvaging holiday was sputtering. We brushed the dust from the tops of the pillows and sheets and tried to ignore the overpowering stench of mildew and the hordes of ants swarming the shower head. In the morning, besides the utter emptiness and erosion of the place, we realized the dining hall was dormant and we were a good 10 kilometers

from any other eatery. We trudged back up the steps a final time.

Lake Toba, shaped by a massive volcanic explosion into Southeast Asia's largest lake 75,000 years ago, is home to the gregarious, music-loving, ornately architectural and formerly cannibalistic Bataks. The place was once the most popular Indonesian getaway outside Bali. But the last decade has savaged tourism operators here, as throughout the Indonesian archipelago. The Asian financial crash and Indonesia's resultant political crisis started a visitor decline, and it's been driven lower by the deadly Bali bombings by fringe Islamists in 2002 and 2005, the Boxing Day tsunami in late 2004 and fresh bombings and earthquakes in Java and Sumatra in 2005. The country lost roughly 500,000 visitors, or 10% of the previous year's total, in 2003, recovered slightly and then took another big hit in 2006. Overall visitor spending in the country was \$5.3 billion in 2007, still about a billion dollars less than in 1996.

Places outside Java and Bali seem to have been hit the hardest. By 2006, arrivals in North Sumatra's Medan airport were half of what they were before the financial crash. At Toba, it's clear that business is down and the old Mecca has begun to fray heavily around the edges. At the featured traditional village at the northern end of Samosir Island, all the wooden curios for sale are cobwebbed, and in little coves up and down the coast of Samosir, the mosquito fleet of ferries that once shuttled tourists to the mainland grow rusty from idle. Although a phalanx of two-story concrete

Mr. Brooks is a free-lance writer based in Indonesia.

motels and guest houses still cluster around the village of Tuk Tuk on Samosir, just a few can keep up with maintenance.

To halt the decay in Toba and elsewhere, the Indonesian government dutifully plunked down an extra \$15 million this past year on television advertisements, promotional forums throughout Asia and local clinics on smiling, among other tricks of the tourism trade—all as part of a branded Visit Indonesia 2008 campaign. It was a modest sum, given that neighbor India dropped that amount just on television advertisements as part of its \$70 million “Incredible India” program in 2006-07, and Malaysia pumped \$40 million into its successful “Truly Asia” visitor brand in 2000.

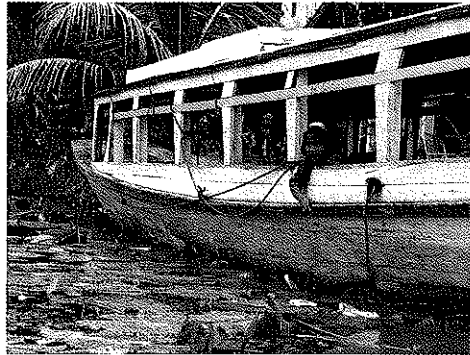
While Indonesian leaders reported a slight uptick in visitor numbers through the first half of this year, it’s hard to see that the campaign has had a broad, uplifting effect. The first-ever Asian Beach Games in Bali in October—a signature event of the Visit Indonesia campaign—suffered painfully sparse crowds. And I still get wistful monthly phone calls from a motel operator and guide fixer in Siberut Island, a UNESCO World Heritage site off the coast of Sumatra, where I visited the homes of tattooed, animist indigenous groups in March and where trekkers used to roam by the hundreds. “When are you coming back?” the man keeps asking me.

But as we settled into more comfortable digs in the tourist hub of Tuk Tuk, next to a vegetarian restaurant that hosted a small gaggle of Westerners, I began to see that Toba had already begun its own repair project. Underneath its crumbling tourist facade, you could still see a strong sense of pride, as if the dearth of visitors had given

the locals a chance to restake their claim to Toba, its landscape and the foundational culture. It’s a phenomenon that won’t always sell package tours in New York or Hong Kong; these are traits that are difficult for an ad agency to communicate in a 30-second TV spot. However, as more and more places stumble over themselves to be the next hotspots, sometimes it’s refreshing to go to a place that doesn’t. They recommend themselves in their own particular way. These are the places that we

will seek out as the world continues to amalgamate.

North of Tuk Tuk one morning, we paddled our collapsible kayaks along the lily-padded marshes at the lake edge, the 500-meter high walls of the volcanic crater looming over ev-



everything. A fisherman working a handnet from his dugout beckoned us over to have a look. When I unzipped the canvas skin of my boat to show him the metal frame, he was impressed. “But yours is a work of art,” I said. “We’d buy one from you.” Ah, but the trees are getting tougher to find today, he said, mixing in English gleaned from the days when the Westerners were more plentiful here. In the last five years, a businessman from the North Sumatran capital of Medan had led the logging of much of the hillside behind us, before locals helped stop him and resultant landslides. Without that drive, “Someday, we’ll just be a crowded city like Jakarta,” he said, laughing.

We ran into others like him. One minivan driver on Samosir told my wife: I love this place. I can be with my family and there’s always a chance to fish, he said. Over on the mainland hub of Parapat, we met an old man who farmed and ran a small convenience shop. He’d been offered a house

to retire to in Jakarta, where his son is a famous Batak artist. But he wanted to stay around Toba and work every day. Working made him healthy, he told friends.

Much is always made of the Bataks' penchant for eating defeated enemies or deviants of the traditional code up until the early 19th century, apparently spicing up the doomed with chilies before decapitating them. But when they converted en masse to Christianity and gave up cannibalism after an onslaught of missionaries, it was the Batak creation myths rooted in the awing landscape of North Sumatra that survived. The animal kingdom, the legend goes, emerged from the branches of an original banyan which fell onto the ground and scattered into creatures. From the eggs of a bird, the first human was born on the highest point in Samosir. The visitors may come and go but the birthplace still inspires a deep attachment not only for local Batak farmers and fishermen around the island—living in boat shaped wooden houses on stilts, with facades patterned in reds and blacks and carved with animal shapes—but also for professionals who've moved to the big cities to seek their fortune.

And so "Save the Tao" T-shirts and stickers around Tuk Tuk marked a continuing campaign supported by Batak activists in Jakarta and Medan to clean up pollution from sewage, factories around the lake and fish farms, all of which began collecting in the 1990s in the slow-draining lake.

One afternoon, we steamed an hour and half from Tuk Tuk to the village of Sigapiton and walked among heavy-timbered houses and rice paddies while Simon, a blonde, chain-smoking transplanted French-Canadian guide we'd befriended handed out soap and shampoo to trailing local kids. "This place hasn't changed in the 20 years I've been taking people here," he said. Withered grandmothers hung up washing done with rainwater collected off of tin roofs. Above it, the paddies formed a

massive amphitheater in a valley scoured out of the rim of the old volcano crater. We crossed over the earthen irrigation canals and passed the brightly hued concrete tombs of the ancestors. Circling back to the village we came across a procession of women in pastel silk blouses, each with a kilo of rice balanced in a tall straw sack on her head. They had just left the church and were headed for the wedding reception up the hill. Buried in each sack of rice was some money for the new couple. They sent us down to the little wooden chapel nearby to watch the final, stern-faced photographs of the bridegroom's party shot by a cameraman with an ungainly, 70s vintage video-cam. That's when we noticed, among the remaining ladies in the narrow wooden pews, that fake hairbuns were all the rage when dressing up in Sigapiton.

As we boarded the boat to leave, two kids splashed around next to an old rusted ferry nearby. On the ferry's roof, somebody had painted the words *Time is many*. It seemed like a fitting piece of found art for this day and this place, at the roots of Batak life. Yet in reality, the painter, in the thick of making a living and not so separated from the hustle of modernity, had probably scrawled a phonetic *Time is money*. And sitting there staring at me it was a stark reminder that cold hard cash, not authenticity, is still the trump card here.

Sure enough, the two swimmers nearby had quickly gotten dressed and called out from the deck of the ferry. "Money, money, money," said one of them, twisting his face into a clown-like frown. "I'm poor, mister!" He reached out his hand with practiced humility. I fought back a grin. I thought about tossing him a thousand rupiah note, for the act, but didn't.

We pulled away and the little kid, seeing no rupiahs, put his dukes up. I put up mine. We shadowboxed across the water, to the delight of his buddy, as the village receded into the old crater painted with paddies. ■