

# Cycling South Sulawesi

Roaring waterfalls, men running over hilltops with butterfly nets, and bustling town markets spilling onto the streets - some of the sights as the 2009 Sulawesi Adventurers pedalled 1200 kilometres around South Sulawesi in January this year. Sulawesi, the eleventh largest island in the world, and situated east of Borneo and north of Java is part of the equator straddling Indonesian archipelago. Outside of Makassar, the capital of the province of South Sulawesi, the major livelihoods are farming and fishing, so most of the group's riding was through villages, rice paddies, terraced hillsides and corn fields, returning the welcoming waves of the many locals, while dodging their chickens, goats, buffalos and recent harvests of corn, cocoa, cloves or tapioca laid out to dry on woven thatch mats by the road side. Often there were stalls with young village ladies selling fruit, with a wide variety on offer from the exotic rambutan, snake fruit, custard apple and jack fruit, to bananas, pineapple and coconut. And at five regular times during the day the azan's call to prayer would echo from the mosques, one call rolling into another as the Adventurers glided from village to village.

Led by Colin Freestone, who first came to Indonesia in 1968, this inaugural group of 26 riders took to the roads of Sulawesi for a cycle tour planned to provide an experience of non-tourist Indonesia, and that it did. The Adventurers, as they called themselves, soon adapted to the humidity, or at least learnt to live with it. Early in the trip the group would start at 7 am but by the end the start time was around 6 am, to avoid the heat of the midday sun. The group quickly got used to sharing the roads with motorbikes, trishaws, mini-buses, other cyclists and sometimes horse drawn carts and teams of fully laden ponies. Fellow travellers on motorbikes would often slow down to ride beside them and ask them all manner of questions. 'Where do you come from?' 'Where are you going?' 'Where is your husband/wife?' 'Do you like Indonesian food?' The riders sometimes found it difficult to keep conversation going when they were negotiating a hairpin bend while pedalling up a mountainside.

Colin had mapped out a route that started gently from Makassar, following the coast along the southern and eastern edges of the peninsula that is South Sulawesi. The first few days were relatively short, the terrain flat or gently undulating. Knowing that the number of days on the flat were limited the riders became increasingly conscious of the mountains on the inside of the island. For a week or so they travelled along the coast, staying mainly in local wismas and beach cottages and cooling off in the ocean at the end of each day's riding. At Palopo they turned inland and westward and rode into the lush green forests and mountains of magical Tana Toraja, dotted here and there with distinctive boat shaped houses, ancestral grave sites and rice terraces. The terrain changed again during the last week back down south to Makassar through the mountains (with lots of truly spectacular descents), and villages that were traditional in the Buginese style. Highlights of the last week of the trip included staying in long houses that were set up as a living museum in Batu-Batu and relieving sore muscles and weary limbs in the thermal pools at Lejja National Park, near Watamsopeng.



Sulawesi's roads are not well sign posted, accurate maps are hard to come by and GPS maps of the region do not exist. So while in the saddle, the group stretched out for a kilometre or so, each riding to their individual abilities, fitness and touring preferences, regrouping at rest stops and keeping together through towns or where the route was complicated. In Watampone and Sengkang they had the novel experience of a police escort into and out of town, sirens and all, not that they were necessary. While most of the roads were well kept, there were some quite

bumpy stretches, which tested riders' skills and equipment and vindicated the decision of some to have a bike with some suspension.

On the road they learnt about pondoks - shady bamboo or wooden platforms where locals have a lie down, or gather to sell fruit and catch up on the latest gossip. These soon became the group's preferred rest stops - villagers always welcoming them when they rested in their pondoks, or sometimes even on their front verandahs. Bit hard to imagine happening in LA or Sydney. The word 'pondoking' soon became a favourite word in the group's vocabulary.

Over the month long journey the group had many opportunities to experience Indonesian culture - through musical performances, translated conversations with the locals, and their daily exchanges with villagers. While many western influences have not yet made it to Sulawesi, mobile phones were everywhere, and young people in particular were very keen to use them for photos. Similarly when the visitors' cameras came out small groups of children quickly grew, then came the mothers and fathers followed by the grandparents. These exchanges gave the Adventurers the chance to practice their bahasa Indonesia and for the locals to practice their bahasa Inggris.

There were rest days at Bira Beach, on the south-eastern tip of the island, at Sengkang on Lake Tempe, and at Rantepeo in Tana Toraja. Near Bira the group detoured to Tana Beru to see large traditional wooden sea going sailing boats being built, on order from Germany and Scandinavia. Interestingly, Indonesia is the only country in the world to still have commercially viable sailing fleet. On the rest day some of them hired a boat and snorkelling gear and headed for a nearby island. It turned out that the better snorkelling was beside cliffs near Bira, but they had fun walking through the island village, and bought sarongs and coconuts. And once they found the good snorkelling 'it was like floating around in a bubble', enjoying the schools of brightly coloured tropical fish swimming through the myriad shaped live coral.

As they cycled into Sengkang, the home of Bajau culture, they heard clacking coming from under the Buginese stilt houses, this being womenfolk weaving silk fabrics. Then they visited silk factories to buy the resulting scarves and sarongs. They rode in long boats on Lake Tempe to visit floating villages. From the English-speaking guide they heard about the lives of the fishermen, who stay on the floating houses while working, then head back to their houses in town to enjoy satellite television.

While most of Sulawesi is Muslim, in Tana Toraja animistic beliefs and Christianity exist side by side. In the main town of Rantepeo the Adventurers went to a noble person's funeral and saw hundreds of buffalo and pigs being sacrificed. Funerals, a major part of Toraja life, are generally held in July-August and in December-January. Until the funeral season the bodies of the dead are preserved and kept in the home with the family so the dead person's spirit won't be lonely. As part of the hosting arrangements massive temporary pondoks are built in open fields so that the guests may sit and pay their respects as different

parts of the ritual take place. The ceremony can last for up to a week with each new group of visitors being announced on loud speakers. Family members and friends will travel from Makassar, Jakarta or even from overseas to attend the funeral and bring their ritual contributions. These ritual and customary exchanges at funerals keep its members close together and Torajan life well integrated. Guests are greeted by church and family elders, they are offered tea and cakes, and later on meals cooked from the slaughtered animals. Left over meat is distributed according to customary calculations that pass from one generation to the next. After the funerals the dead are usually placed in natural or man made



caves, with things that will support the dead person's favourite habits, such as cigarettes. They are guarded by effigies of men and women, representing family members.

The last week of the trip saw the group cycle from Rantepao down the middle of the island through towns that very rarely see groups of tourists, local or international. Here the variety of food was more limited and the accommodation more basic. There were some real treats though, including staying in a living Buginese museum at Batu-Batu. The Bugis are the main ethnic group in South Sulawesi, and here several traditional long houses have been built and decorated for royalty with antique furniture, bedding and ceramics bought to Sulawesi centuries ago by Chinese traders. That some of the group were left waiting (in the shade underneath one of the stilted longhouses) to get their room allocations while the curator's second and younger wife haggled over fees that she thought should be directed her way, confirmed the authenticity of the experience.

The day after this the group rode one of the hardest 14 km of the trip, numerous steep ascents under a beating sun, to get to the hot springs at Lejja. Once there they rested on the edges of the steaming pool, while a gentle rain shower cooled them down. They watched locals enjoy the pools on the Chinese New Year public holiday - more photo and language opportunities. That night they had a 'seminar' with the team who managed the national park (translated by Colin). The major topic, as discussion developed, was rubbish management. The park team have the problem of trying to keep the park rubbish free without having recourse to legal sanctions of any kind against visitors who litter at will in the context of a 'plastics throwaway' culture, a phenomenon fairly new to Indonesia.

The group's last night was spent in very basic accommodation in another national park - Bantimurung. Here there was a thunderous waterfall feeding a frothing babbling river, and colourful butterflies wafting along the river banks. Butterflies were also available for purchase at the stretch of tourist shops, fixed in resin key rings and pinned onto boards - explaining the men they'd seen earlier bobbing about on hilltops with their nets at the ends of long rods.

On the last day the group rose well before dawn to avoid the traffic from Maros going back into Makassar, only to find it was pouring with rain. As there was no sign of it abating they set off anyway, just after daybreak for the 40 km ride through Friday morning traffic. The group really appreciated the warm showers and other creature comforts of a modern ocean-side hotel. They then set about re-exploring and enjoying the relative modernity of Makassar.

The trip was supported with a truck and two mini-buses. There was plenty of water, tea and coffee at the breaks, sometimes air kelapa (coconut water). At times there was little variety in main meals, but this was made up for with local fruits and kue kampung (village cakes) at the rest stops. Nasi goreng was a staple for breakfast, with pancakes or full breakfast buffets in some of the larger hotels. Lunch and dinner were usually fish or chicken served with rice and soup. In Tana Toraja the group enjoyed piong a local delicacy of spiced chicken steamed in bamboo tubes called piong

As well as the drivers Colin Freestone had two assistants who managed the logistics of accommodation and other administrative matters including in some places, policy escorts. There was a bike engineer riding with the group. He worked tirelessly to re-assemble bikes as people progressively arrived for the start of the trip. He provided similar assistance at the end of the trip, and also did emergency repairs to one of the bikes in Rantepao. This involved somehow putting a bent gear cog back into alignment on a bike which would have otherwise been out of action.

The group certainly benefited from the strong connections that Colin and his family have with Indonesia, their language skills and knowledge of Indonesian culture, and the research they had done in putting the trip together. Prior to the trip they had completed all of the ride several times, and had used those trips to plan the route, the accommodation and meal stops. This was a boutique holiday - highly personalised to allow the riders to experience 'Real' Indonesia. Colin is planning a similar (major) trip in early 2010, and a shorter 9-day trip in August this year. More information, including contact details available at the Cycle Indonesia website ([www.cycleindonesia.com.au](http://www.cycleindonesia.com.au)).