

STORY & PICTURES BY CHRISTINA KOH

Land of mystery

SUMATRA'S Lake Toba, one of the world's largest crater lakes, is a fascinating tourist destination in its own right. One of the biggest draws here is getting a glimpse into the lives of the Toba Bataks, a community living along the lake shore and on Samosir Island, right in the middle of the lake, 906m above sea level.

The history of the Toba Bataks is filled with colourful, and sometimes lurid, descriptions of black magic, warrior kings, and the usual torture and sacrificial killing of tribal enemies who have had the misfortune to lose in battles with the Bataks.

In Ambarita, a Batak village on Samosir's northeastern shore, our guide took our tour group to see their traditional longhouses and a stone courtyard where one King Siallagan used to have his prisoners executed. Half of us winced upon hearing the details, which included clubbing the victim and later bending him over a stone block to have his throat slit like a chicken.

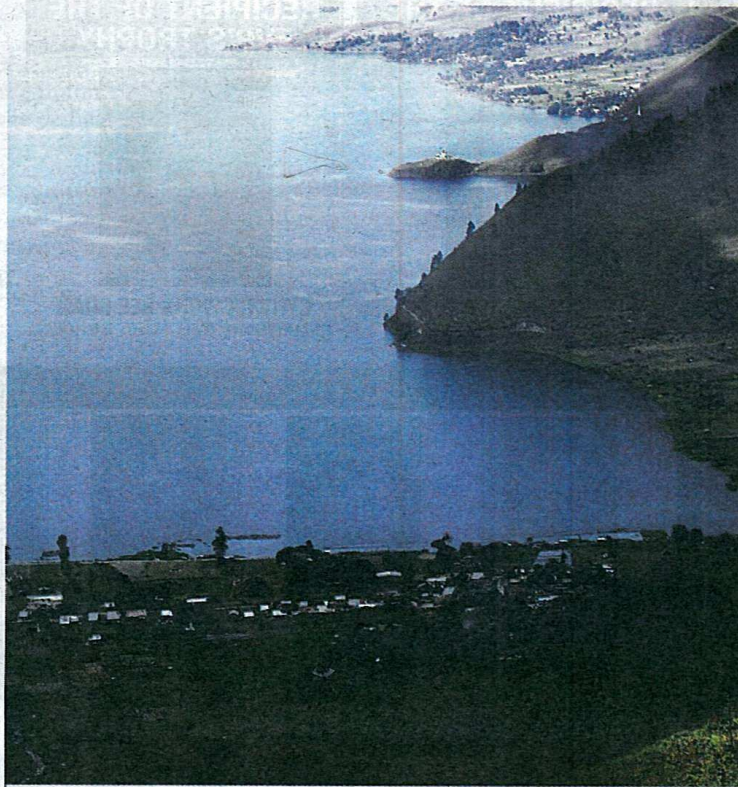
Just the day before, our group from Ipoh arrived at the Polonia Airport in Medan courtesy of Jatayu Airlines, a Medan-based commercial airline that had just opened flights between the two cities last month. After a night's stay at the Dharma Deli Hotel, once known as Hotel de Boer (built in 1898 during Dutch colonial times), we were off next morning on a 176km bus journey to Lake Toba.

The view of the lake from the mountain road was nothing short of spectacular.

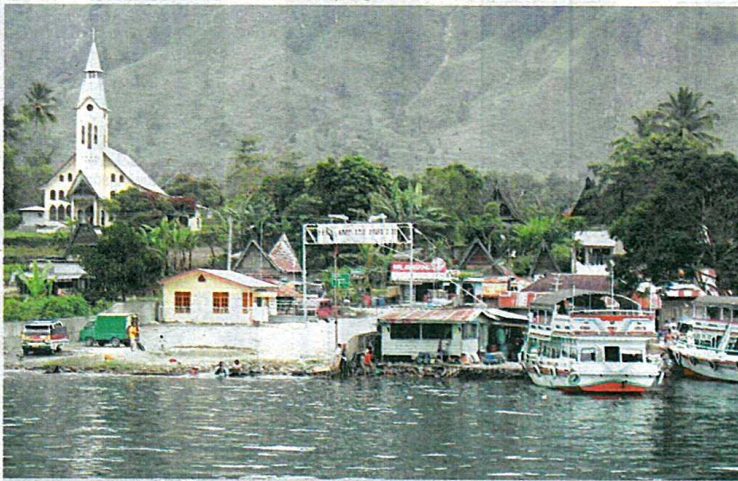
After lunch at Parapat, a tourist town on the lake's eastern shore, and a brief stop at our startlingly beautiful lakeside hotel, we were on the boat for the half-hour ride to the island. Samosir Island, remnants of a volcano millions of years old, with its native Batak villages and numerous resthouses with gorgeous gardens is a happy hunting ground for any photographer.

Muadi our guide, a Chinese Indonesian with P.T. Trophy Tours, explained that the Toba Bataks are actually one of the larger sub-tribes making up the Batak, each with different cultural aspects but with roots that can be traced all the way from Southern India, Mongolia and China.

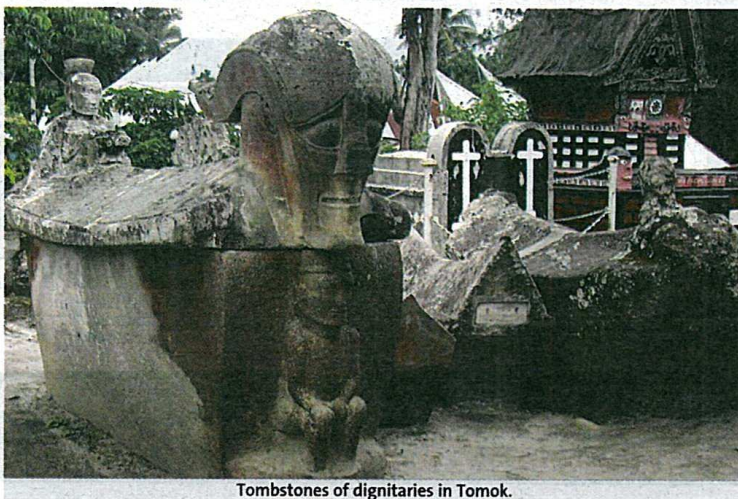
With a population of over four million, the Bataks are one of Indonesia's largest ethnic groups. According to Muadi, roughly 2 million Bataks are Protestant, 300,000 are Roman Catholic, while the rest are Muslim or have no religion.



Lake Toba from Sipisopiso Waterfall.



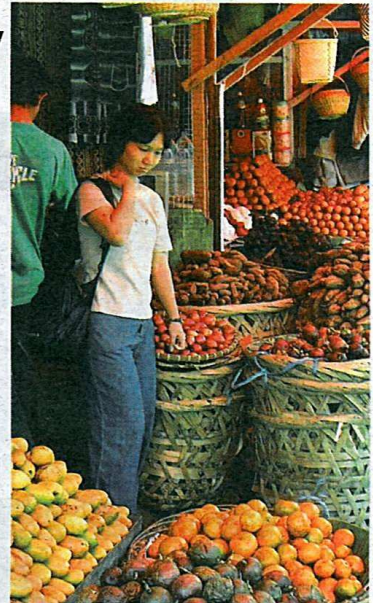
A Batak village settlement with church on the shore of Samosir Island.



Tombstones of dignitaries in Tomok.



Carvings by the Toba Bataks for sale.



Browsing at Berastagi, popular for Marquisa.

Getting there

JATAYU Airlines flies between Ipoh and Medan on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Ipoh is the airline's second Malaysian destination after Penang. For enquiries, contact:

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Website: www.trophytour.com

At Ambarita, the first Toba Batak settlement we visited on Samosir Island, Muadi also pointed out a stone figurine that stood near the entrance to the village itself.

"Anyone who approaches the village with evil intentions will have them stripped away when they pass by the stone figure," he said.

To "create" this guardian is not easy, as illustrated in one account about a *bomoh* who kidnapped a child about five years old from another village. The boy was fed and looked after like a son, until the day the *bomoh* enticed him into a hole in the ground and filled it up with earth till the boy's neck. After days of leaving the boy there without food, the *bomoh* then promised to feed him if he would open his mouth.

"The *bomoh* then poured molten tin (*timah*) down his throat, killing him instantly. The brains were made into a powder or oil to apply onto a stone figurine in the belief the boy's spirit would inhabit it as a guardian.

"These practices died down after the German priest, Nommensen, began spreading Christianity among the Bataks in 1861," Muadi says.

The Toba Bataks today are renowned as a fierce but kind-hearted people, and also aggressive tradesmen when it comes to selling their handicraft. The entire path from the jetty to Ambarita village is occupied on both sides with stalls selling everything from Indonesian batik to intricate wood carvings, the Batak's speciality.

Those of us who had time to bargain ended up with some pretty good deals (if we were canny enough) but the rest of us escaped the swarm of offers.

At the next village, Tomok, Muadi took us

Lake Toba in three days

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to a gravesite that housed the tombstones of ancient kings and generals, and even one Christian grave. The tombstones themselves are a rich source of myth and legend, like the 350-year-old story about a King's loyal friend and advisor named Tengku Mohd Said. This man, said Muadi, once single-handedly defeated 400 enemy warriors by stripping himself naked and scaring them away because they apparently believed seeing a guy in the buff was bad luck.

Back at our hotel in Parapat, Muadi told us that there have been offers from foreign entrepreneurs to create something like a resort theme park at the lake but this has met with strong resistance from the Bataks, who refuse to sell their surrounding land. Much of it has to do with the presence of beautifully tended cemeteries, which can be found nearly everywhere around Lake Toba, and are thus sacred places to the people.

Lake Toba is also certainly the place to go if you want to hear anyone's matter-of-fact accounts of their own encounters with ghosts and spirits. Take the story, for instance, of our tour bus driver who once glanced into his front mirror at night, only to see an "old woman" at the back of his empty bus.

"This is why drivers honk

whenever taking a bend, as a mark of respect to the spirits of people who have died on these mountain roads," Muadi explained, although I secretly suspected the honking was to also tell oncoming traffic to get out of our way.

The next day we had to get up early for our next stops, which included a trip to the Sipisopiso Waterfall (120m high), and Kampung Pematang Purba, a typical Batak village. Like most other long houses, the roof of the "palace" has one end higher than the other, with the higher part of the roof always pointing towards the lake for better *feng shui*. The palace, with the figurehead of a *kerbau* (buffalo), says Muadi, showed that a king was residing there.

After a stop at Berastagi, a tourist town 1,400m above sea level popular for its flowers and fruits (like the "Marquisa" passion fruit), we were back at Medan by afternoon. With the flight back to Ipoh in just a few hours, some of us still had time for some last minute shopping. Looking to use up the last of our rupiahs, many of us spent it on Indonesia's famous layered cake and honeycomb cake to take back to friends and family.

Taking in stunning lakeviews and listening to the fascinating tales of black magic, spirits and ancient legends was not a bad way to spend just three short days. **W**



Ambarita's stone guardian.