



# Rumble in the jungle

Ian Hibell is Britain's most widely travelled touring cyclist, having set off to see the world in 1963. Here he recalls travelling in Indonesia in the 1970s –and having a close escape

Sumatra is one of many islands united under the Indonesian flag, the first uncut gemstone of a tropical necklace forming a great crescent from Asia to our destination, Australia. Beyond Java and Bali lay islands of mystery only visited irregularly under sail by fishermen, traders, and an occasional Catholic mission boat. If I made it that far I planned to cover each island from tip to tip and rely upon help from the fishermen to ferry me across the gaps.

Hans was sceptical of my chances, planning to fly on from Jakarta. He turned to me, removed his hat in mock reverence, and said, 'Ian, you try that, I never see you again. You want I tell your parents you drowned? Or the cannibals eat you?'

The numerous rivers draining off Sumatra's mountainous interior into the Malacca Straits had prevented highway construction on the eastern slopes. To avoid this watershed the only through-road climbed over

the central ridge to initially follow the Indian Ocean. Leaving the hotpot of overcrowded Medan we overtook turbaned Indian drivers gently nodding, sitting dreamily on their creaking ox-drawn carts. We threaded through characterless unkept villages.

## MONKEYING AROUND

Unable to procure a detailed map, the only guide we had was the relevant section of a tattered Bartholomew's issue covering all of South-East Asia. The heights neatly separated in a pretty shade of green and brown were deceiving. 'This man Bartholomew I will kill gutt,' exploded Hans, punching the map. 'He says here it is flat!' He snorted with exaggerated anger, hoping to scare the children and adults standing tightly around our table. We were a novelty. Apparently Europeans had rarely passed in these villages: easy to understand why! In the end, the army arrived by

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armoured car to disperse the mob.

Above the lowland rice fields, the jungle became as thick as I had ever known, with huge Sumatran oaks, green-trunked and vermilion-topped betel nut trees, coco palms, and an entanglement of choking vines and lianas – easy to get lost in on a call of nature. I thought this had happened to Hans on our third day, and returned to find him by a huge flower over a foot in diameter. As I approached closer I could see he was actually trying to make friends with a monkey. 'He likes me gutt,' grinned Hans, making ape-like faces. I was halfway through a retort when in turning I lost balance and dropped the bike. To Hans's glee, I gathered a legful of irremovable black chain grease. The monkey took off chattering in fright at my language, to leave us to begin our climb up into Karonese territory and Lake Toba.

Here the women do the work. You see them on their way to the

fields balancing large square-bladed hoes on their heads, the handles trailing. Probably the men stayed at home to drink the native beer *tuak* and play chess. 'This idea I like,' said Hans. He always carried a pocket set. He thought the only good the Portuguese accomplished was to bring the game to the island. With plenty of chess and heat, our progress became slow. The inland sea is 1,000ft above the cloying coastal humidity. I didn't want to abandon Hans but short of doing so the lake began to appear unreachable.

### LAKE TOBA AT LAST

Maybe it was only the sweat and effort expended to reach it that gave the lake a silvery sheen and the sunset a deeper hue. The lake might have merged in with the memory of so many others but for the sound of strange music gliding along its still waters. We glanced at one another and wordlessly agreed to trace it. We eventually found ourselves overlooking two facing rows of great curved-roof abodes, their outward slanting gables leaning over a mass of dancing people. There were the Tobanese, cousins of the Karons. They were once feared as magicians and cannibals who used to kill all visitors.

By the light of the oil lamps and flaming torches we could see children and older people watching from stilt-supported platforms and under deep eaves at their entrances; we scrambled down to join them. The dancing was a ceremonial event to honour the fitting interment of a long-time dead chief's bones...

I found travelling with Hans to be entertaining but exasperatingly slow. A great personality, he was prepared to discuss anything but improved bicycle design. He dearly loved his sit-up-and-beg dreadnought, but with a load sufficient for a tour of Siberia the energy to propel it meant he galloped through calories. He could never pass a *warong* (small eating stall) without stopping to eat, and philosophically insisted that that which was not seen today would still be there tomorrow. Only once did I ever see him accelerate.

### ESCAPE INTO THE NIGHT

It was evening as I rode alone into a village, for Hans had dropped back. As I rode up the long hill to enter, people slowly assembled by the



Westerners were a rare sight in Indonesia in the 1970s and Ian's arrival often drew crowds

corrugated earth track. They stared at me suspiciously and quietly. Each hut was curiously identical, a stilted windowless box of bamboo covered with nipa-palm. A cloak of silence hung over the village. I could feel an antagonism in the charged air and felt strangely uneasy.

I rode back to contact Hans as more and more natives joined the tongueless community by the road's edge. When we returned together I doubt if anybody in that village was not standing there. Then like a wave washing over a sea wall the crowd lapped over to mill across the road. We were jostled and encircled. I felt like a victim of a lynching party, queasily anticipating the worst. I could hear Hans being furious in German to no effect.

The store lay beyond a water-filled drainage culvert running along one side of the road. There was a bridge for it was too wide to leap, and it looked deep. In trying to see us the crowd was becoming a hysterical mob. To get a better view a boy climbed onto a high tree already bending under the weight of half-a-dozen others. The branch snapped and the lad fell. They fished him out of the culvert, limp, and a mother wailed.

For a moment everybody's attention was diverted and we forgot about buying food and fled. The crowd saw us slipping away and turned on us. An angry primitive hum was rising to erupt into the

roar of a pack. A surge of potential violence converged in our wake, and running footfalls beat a warning tattoo. We rode for our lives.

### READY FOR ANYTHING

Having put an estimated 10 miles between us and our would-be assailants, we glumly assessed the situation: likely a wet, foodless night in the jungle. But we ran across a police manned post. The guards were surprised to see us for we had passed through a rebel communist enclave! Even the trucks and buses would not stop there, we were told.

After a night with the police, we feared a repetition. We didn't discuss it but long silences were a giveaway. Then Hans echoed my own troubled conscience. 'Ian, if we had stopped to help that boy, then they'd kill us good, yes.' Escape had been instinctive, but the incident hung over our heads like a black cloud.

Hans had several punctures, which I blamed on his huge and in my opinion unnecessary load. Then my front carrier fractured. Hans seized the opportunity to point out the foolishness of using alloy equipment. To my chagrin, I could only fix it with some wire from the coil Hans triumphantly produced – with scathing remarks at my own unpreparedness.

*This is an extract from Ian Hibell's unpublished book, Four Days at Ragged Point.*

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