

About the Author

Sree Kumar is an essayist and amateur photographer. He was educated in London, Oxford and Singapore, where he now lives.

Picture overleaf of tree in blossom in the Botanical Gardens, Purwodadi

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Java: Garden of the East

Sree Kumar

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The photographs of Java in this book were taken in different periods between 1993 and 2010. The first section is on West Java, taken in 2010; the second is on Central Java, taken in 1993 and 2005; the third on East Java, taken in 2006 and 2008.

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Java: Garden of the East

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Java: Garden of the East

Java is unusual. It is green; it is full of trees, fields and villages. The cities have an old world charm. There is a slow pace at which life unfolds. This book of photographs tries to capture these timeless features.

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Asmoro's house, Jakarta; West Java





Exhibition on Nusa Tenggara, Jakarta







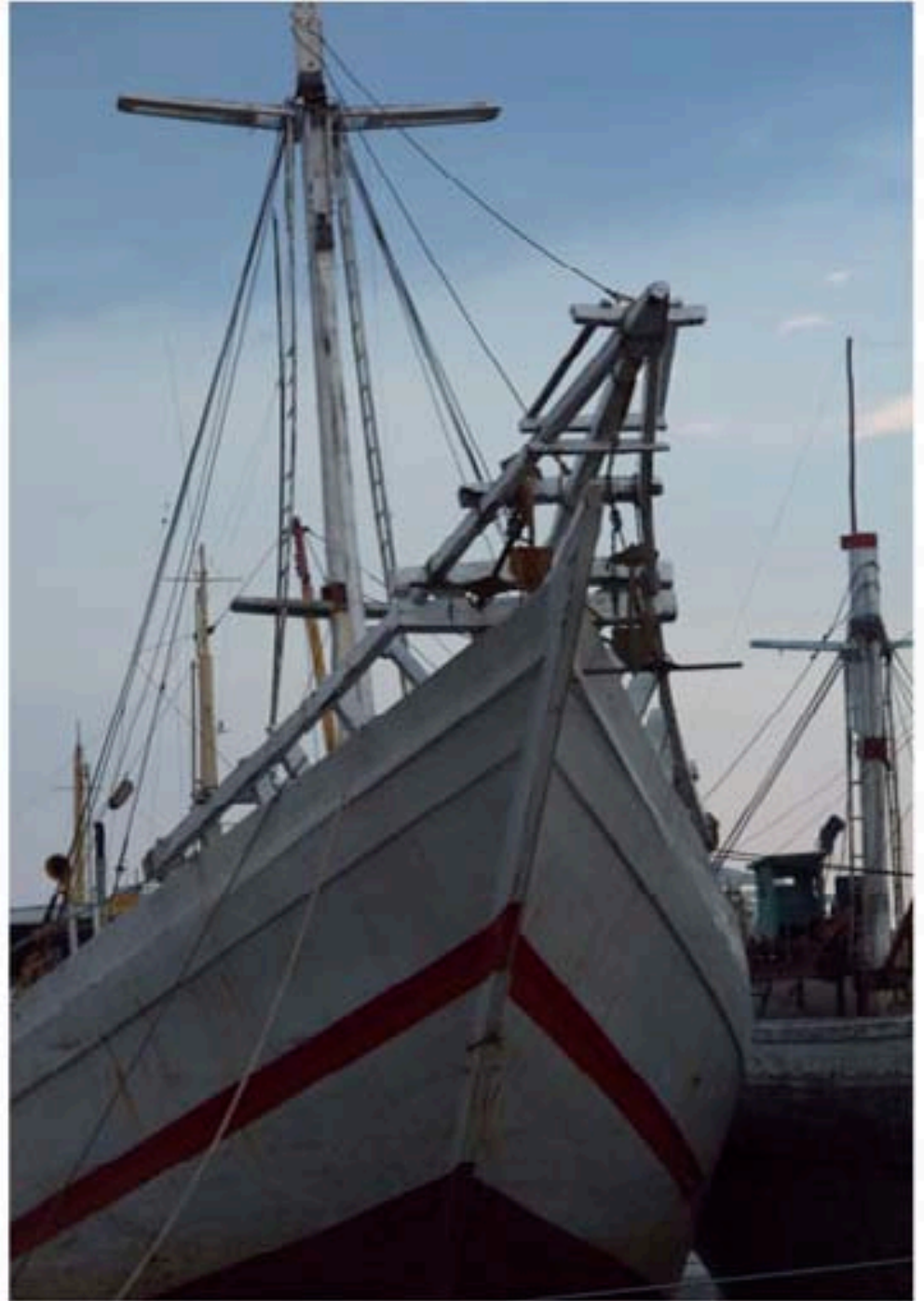






Catholic Church, left; Kraton, Cirebon, right 11

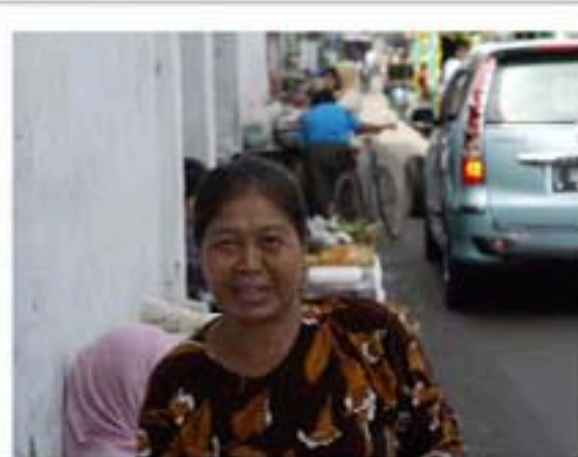








Trishaw man, top; Durians, bottom left; Confucius Temple, Cirebon, bottom right







Hawkers, Batik District, Cirebon



Hawkers, Batik District, Cirebon







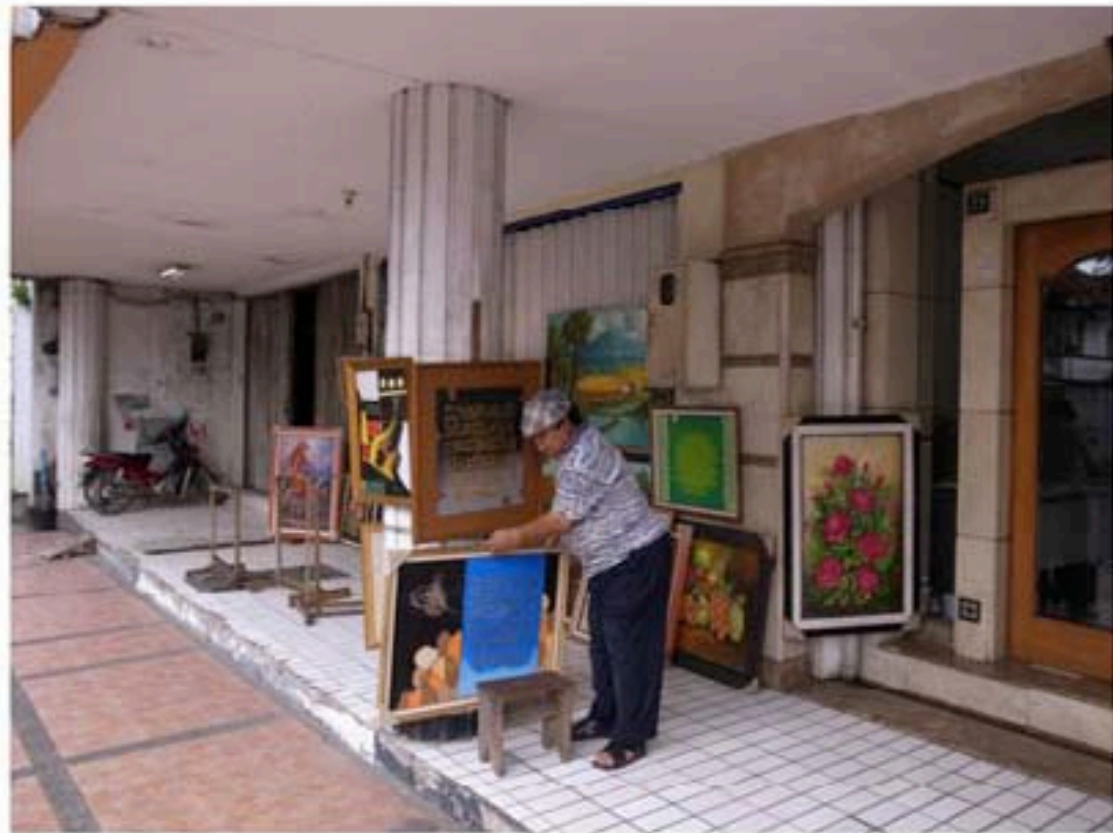
Tasikmalaya scenes



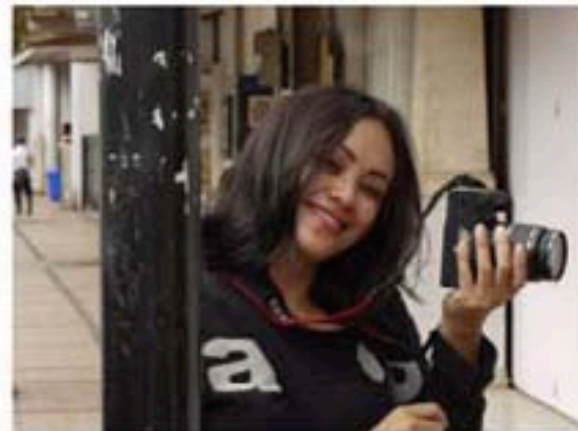
Fields, Tasikmalaya



Garut



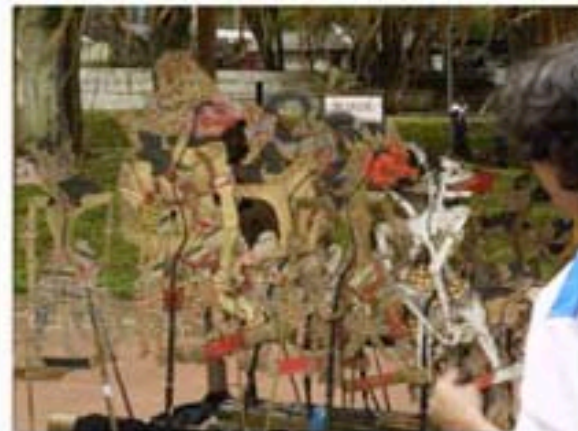








Wigs, top; Dominoes, below; Bandung





Railway Station, Bandung







Guest House, Kebun Raya Bogor



Guest House, Kebun Raya, top; President's Palace, bottom left; Tree trunk, Bogor



Market scenes, Bogor



Yogyakarta; Central Java





Yogyakarta, left; Ambarawa, right





Pekalongan









Ambarawa



Tiger Dance, Ambarawa Railway Station





Ambarawa



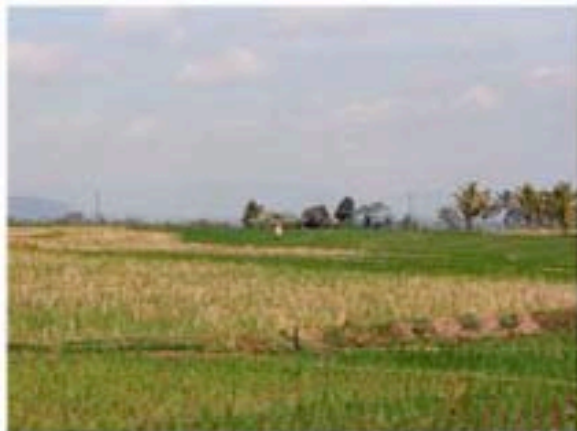
Bedono







Losari

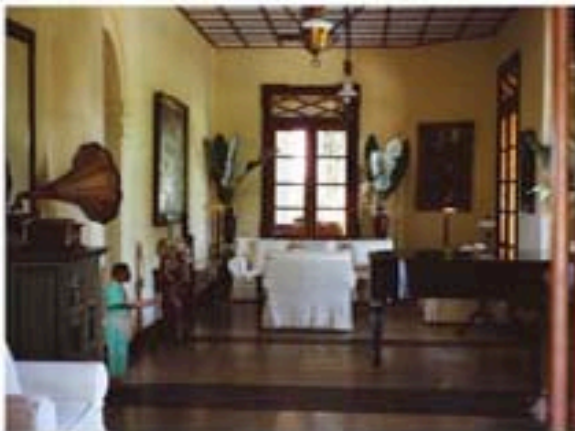




Ambarawa







Dieng Plateau, top; Losari, below



Chinese Temple for Cheng Ho, Semarang



Magelang





Semarang







Losari







Mojokerto; East Java





Blitar









Blitar







Blitar Wates, left; Blitar Market, right













Tugu, Blitar





Blitar







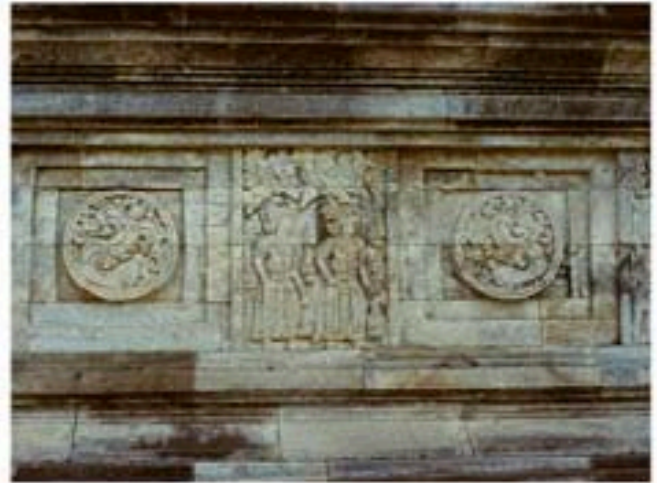














Revisiting Cirebon

The train from Gambir station left on time. It was packed. There were mothers with children, grandparents, students and a sprinkling of tourists. The backyards of Jakarta looked unfamiliar as the train passed along the raised tracks. There were chicken coops, fruit trees and the occasional vegetable vendor, selling her produce along the tracks. In the last hours of the morning the business city seemed so far away. The world of the train tracks was so different and rural, yet it was cutting through the heart of the old parts of the city.

Soon we gathered speed. We were now out of the metropolitan area. We passed the old Dutch-built station at Manggarai and were then off at a fast clip. The shifting scenes were of green fields, fruit trees, old brick houses and small towns, all nestled close to the tracks. On board, the buffet car was busy. The hostess came along, taking orders for snacks which were delivered by a young man in a faded uniform. We slowed as we got to Cikampek and then came to a halt. The wait was short and within a few minutes we were off again.

There were rice fields on both sides of the railway line. The gentle rattle of the coaches and the cold air-conditioning made for sweet slumber. We passed plots of banana trees and an occasional warehouse. In the distance, there were little brick houses with their red roofs glistening in the sunlight. As we approached the outskirts of Cirebon, the train slowed. Now there were more villages and a greater variety of fruit orchards. The tracks were lined with mango trees and stretches of cane fields. Then, in a lurch and at a snail's pace, we pulled into the station in Cirebon. It was noon.

The bright sunlight shone through the plastic roof of the platform. This was the new addition to this old railway station. Outside were becaks and taxis jostling for fares. Our driver held a placard welcoming us to the city. The map had showed the hotel to be nearby, but the ride from the station took almost twenty minutes. Our map was obviously not to scale. The hotel was neat, clean and new. The staff were efficient as we were shown to our room.

In the hot afternoon we drove around the city. The famed batik district was a half hour away. The road into the area was narrow, with houses and shops standing at the edge. Becaks, motorcycles, pony carts and the occasional car choked the narrow lanes. No one was about. The afternoon sun was too much for even the mangy dogs sheltering under the mango trees in the compounds.

At Budi's batik house, the tall, fat, man laid out his collection of antique batiks. He wore a pair of glasses smudged with fingerprints. His wife and a helper unfurled each piece, showing the intricate work and patterns. Budi was an authority on the making of each pattern and its origins. In between, he explained that he had trained at a madrasah in Banten with a famous teacher. A painting of him next to his master hung over the doorway. His problem, he told me, was that he was going blind because of diabetes. A condition, I told him, that Gus Dur had also suffered from. He laughed out loud and went back to explaining the batiks he had. We spent more than an hour with him and left, having bought a few pieces. Before leaving he took us to another room where a collection of Dutch and Ming antiques was displayed. Budi, I now understood, was more than just a batik specialist.

We found our way to the oldest of the three palaces in Cirebon. An old mosque stood outside the grounds. Within the palace perimeter were numerous mango trees while several other large plane trees provided shade. The palace was well looked after. The inner courtyard had been whitewashed and the walls had been kept in repair. The old entrance looked magnificent. The walls of the central hall were embedded with Dutch and Chinese porcelain plates. There were intricate frescoes of roses and other flowers on the walls next to the main podium. Traces of Chinese influence were in the floral work: a mixture of Islam and Chinese artwork. The floor was a shiny black. The entrance to the inner palace from the main doorway ran diagonally rather than directly across, in keeping with Chinese concept of “feng sui”. There seemed to be a harmony of sorts within the palace. The outer verandah had deep roofs to keep the tropical weather at bay.

In the small museum adjoining the palace were a number of royal carriages built in the style of a garuda with moveable wings. There were some cannons from the Chinese period and a collection of spears and other armaments. In a corner was a painting of the first ruler of the Cirebon dynasty: a Hindu king. He was stout and bare-bodied, had a thick moustache and stood next to a tiger. The Indian features were unmistakable. So here in the Cirebon palace it all came together: a Hindu kingdom that was converted to Islam and then infused with the culture brought by the seaborne Chinese traders who came with Admiral Cheng Ho. Indeed, there is some thought that Islam was brought here by the Chinese. After all Cheng Ho was a Muslim and it would not be surprising to know that he had Muslim sailors and traders with him.

At Gunung Jati, the mausoleum of the Muslim saint who brought Islam to this part of Java, there were busloads of pilgrims, the women dressed in hijab. There was a long queue waiting to get into the area of the tomb. This, being the first Thursday of the month, was the usual day for those seeking favours to pray here. Outside the tomb, there was the usual collection of small shops and hawkers selling holy trinkets and other paraphernalia. Religion, it would seem, had been rediscovered.

The old port of Cirebon still receives Bugis ships that ply the Java Sea. The port had become bigger. It was now the centre of bulk coal sent from Kalimantan (Borneo). An old Bugis boat, half sunk, stood in the water next to a larger one. Sacks of goods were being loaded by well-muscled Buginese sailors, balancing their way across narrow planks. At the other end of the quay a wooden ship had been moored, the paint on its sides worn off. An old Dutch warehouse stood in the distance. Inside were ancient machines, and ship's parts. The evening light threw long shadows on the quay as birds took flight and found refuge in the large trees on the edge of the port. Two men with air-rifles stood among the trees waiting to shoot pigeons.

The Arab quarter in Cirebon is small and less well-known. But in the narrow streets of this quarter is an old mosque with rare Chinese porcelain pieces embedded in its walls. An old woman sat in the doorway, welcoming all to this place of worship. The entrance to the mosque was built in the style of a Javanese Hindu temple with deep red walls and tiered posts on the sides of the steps. The children in the neighbourhood looked Middle Eastern with their fair skin, dark curly hair and rosy cheeks.

There were several curly haired men, some tall, and all wearing sarongs, lounging on the steps outside the houses. They had the distinct looks of Yemenis or Palestinians, or even north Indians. But this was to be expected. Cirebon had always, from its early days, been a port city for Arabs, Chinese, Indians and others. The seeds of that time continue to be visible today.

Just outside the Chinese quarter is a temple for Confucius. The caretaker could not speak Chinese. He only spoke Bahasa and was keen to show us around. The temple and its surroundings were clean and in good repair. On the altar was the deity of Confucius facing lighted candles and joss sticks. A child ran around the compound outside, making the only sounds in this quiet enclosure. The Chinese have been in Cirebon for a very long time. This part of west Java was a traditional port of call for Chinese seafarers and traders, the others being Banten, further west, and Semarang, east from here, along the north coast. They continue to be an important component of Cirebon's population, running most of the shops and big businesses.

The Chinese quarter is, as in all Javanese towns, filled with shops selling hardware, dried goods, electrical equipment, cosmetics, clothes and all manner of other necessities. Cirebon's main produce is prawn crackers and the Chinese had cornered the market for this and all the other local edibles. There were several varieties of prawn crackers on sale in a big shop, "toko", on the main street. Some came from Indramayu, further up the coast, while many other grades came from around Cirebon. In addition to prawn crackers there were dried fruits, salted fish, prawn paste, and spiced edibles in large bottles neatly arranged along the shelves on the wall. The cashier was a Javanese girl who had memorised all the prices by heart.

Out on the street, motorcycles were everywhere. Around the corner from the provision shop stood the local market and fruit stalls. Different varieties of bananas were displayed next to a stall selling durians that had been cut open to show the fleshy yellow insides. Further along, a hawker was frying soya cakes in a wok. Two women in civil service uniforms went about doing their marketing among the fruit and clothes stalls. One of them was constantly on her mobile phone as she dodged motorcycles and pedestrians. Outside the market two women sat tending to a stall selling straw hats. They giggled and gesticulated animatedly, trying to entice me to buy their display. In the late evening, the tempo had wound down. Soon it would be dark and the market would close for the day. Already the hurricane and petromax lamps were being lit. The sky darkened and the first drops of rain rattled off the tin roofs as we left the Chinese quarter.

At the seafood restaurant, we were among the first diners of the evening while the rain lashed against the windows with a vengeance. Two men sat at the next table eating with their fingers. A large plate of curried crab was rapidly consumed and then another. We sat watching them enjoy their meal. We settled for barbecued fish in black sauce, spiced prawns, vegetables and rice. The fish and prawns were incredibly tasty. The cooking in Cirebon has much to commend it, everything is fresh and prepared in the special Sundanese style of sweet and spicy sauces.

Back at the hotel there was a sorry looking Englishman in the bar, trying to read with the television at full blast. He had come from Jakarta for the long weekend. His wife, when she turned up, was a stunning Sundanese woman from Cirebon. It was, for them, a time of visiting family. He was holding the first volume of Lee Kuan Yew's memoir, "The Singapore Story".

He kept being interrupted by his children barging into the bar to see what the barman was up to. The eldest daughter, about ten years old, came to get a large packet of crackers and peanuts. She turned to her father and said, "Its okay, its free", and then ran off with the others. When the wife arrived she found that the bar had run out of ingredients for the "long island cocktail". I left as the man was trying to explain to the barman how to make a "long island cocktail" without the full ingredients: a sort of short "long island cocktail"?

The next morning the Englishman and his wife looked harried, with their children gathered around the buffet breakfast. We left soon after. Our stop on the way out of Cirebon was to see Budi again. This time he was without his trademark haji's cap. Once again he and his wife took out their treasured batiks. Now he enrolled his daughter who took over the unfurling of the cloth. I watched in fascination as Budi went about explaining the intricacies of the different patterns, the length of time taken to design them and how old they were. His eyes glistened when talking of the quality of the cloth and the unique designs. He almost choked and broke into a sweat when the bargaining started. My companion was determined to buy his rare pieces but at price far below what he had quoted. He looked to me for support, "Bapak, how can? 600,000 Rupiah less?" I watched the duel. He took off his smudged glasses and looked around in despair. He clutched his treasured batiks close to his chest. My companion began to select more pieces. He gulped. The amount he quoted became incomprehensible while my companion stood her ground. Then, in a moment of weakness, he acquiesced, and a bargain was struck. He adjusted his glasses and wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead while his wife took out the receipt book. He bid us a fond farewell as his daughter kissed my hand.

On the street outside Budi's house the traffic had come to a standstill. There were pony carts, motorcycles and a reversing SUV stuck in the lane. On either side of the narrow road were little rickety stalls selling vegetables, eggs, noodles and fermented soya. In the typical Javanese fashion no one seemed hurried. Slowly, the SUV backed out, the motorcycles took off, and the pony carts trundled away. We followed and in the distance I could see Budi, waving goodbye and wiping his face with a towel, having parted with some of his rare batiks in an unequal contest.

Ahead of us was a six hour journey through the scenic hills of Tasikmalaya and Garut. I sat back and took in the sights as we left Cirebon.

Sree Kumar
April, 2010



