



Manado

Sree Kumar



Made on a Mac



Manado: Paradise Undiscovered

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Photographs taken in 2008.

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Kima Bajo Bay, left and above; Manado port, right





Manado port













Village hut, top; Manado town, below









Sunset, Kima Bajo Bay









Manado town, Arab quarter









Seafood stall, top; Minahasa highlands, below





Minahasa highlands





Minahasa highlands





Kima Bajo village





Manado Bay





Downtown Manado, top









Christmas troupe





Christian village

Discovering Paradise

I came to know of Manado when I was a schoolboy. It was from the name of a famous Indonesian actress, Maria Manado. She was a beauty in her time, having appeared in numerous Malay movies. In the early 1960s she married one of the Malaysian sultans and came to live in Cameron Highlands where, as schoolboys, we became curious to see her. We knew that the women from Manado were beautiful, and Maria Manado was the epitome of that beauty. So it was that we came to associate Manado with paradise: a place where there were beautiful women.

We are often told that paradise is somewhere far away. Almost inevitably it is not the place where one is living. If paradise exists perhaps Manado comes close and not just because of the women. Sitting on northern Sulawesi (Celebes of old), nestled by mountains on one side and a blue bay on the other, it is an unknown place to most travellers. But for the die-hard scuba divers, Manado is a must. The seas around the area have some of the finest diving spots in the world. So the islands around the bay and the open sea have become the divers' paradise.

Scuba divers are a strange species of sportsmen. They dive in the most exotic locations in the world, yet have little or no contact with the land or its beauty. Manado suffers a similar fate. Divers come and set off for the islands, giving the town a miss. Yet Manado is the true paradise. For here, life goes on as it has for years. Progress has come, but in measured ways. There is a slower pace of life, and a sense of the unfolding earth.

The roads are narrow and, in places, full of potholes. Any journey becomes unpredictable. The resort proclaimed to be in touch with nature. So it was. Sitting on a hilltop overlooking a bay and a fishing village, it was the closest one could get to living in harmony with the elements. The view of the bay through coconut fronds was magnificent and only offset by the poor food, making the notion of living with nature all the more real. The couple that came for a diving holiday spent all of the four days out at sea. They ate the bad food and complained loudly. We, on the other hand, came to explore Manado.

This is a largely Christian part of Indonesia. Churches abound, and all denominations are present. When the Dutch came to Manado to explore the spice islands, they brought Christianity. The Manadonese took to Dutch practices with a fervent ardour and, in time, wanted Manado to become a province of Holland. But that was in the past. Today, both Christianity and Islam co-exist in this part of Sulawesi. Retired military officers and civil servants, having served in Java and the other islands, now live in Manado where life is that much more relaxed.

The town has a rustic feel. There are shops and stalls, competing for space on the narrow main street. Motorcycles are everywhere. Off on one side of the old town is the Chinese quarter where there are godowns and a temple. Further up from there is the fish and vegetable market.

Manado is a fish lover's heaven. The fish is fresh, brought to the market late in the morning. The road along the coast has a string of sea food restaurants. In the roadside stalls fresh mackerel is roasted over an open fire and served with a hot and spicy sauce. In the bigger restaurants the variety of seafood is astounding. There are large prawns, squid, crab, lobster, octopus, and different varieties of fish, all prepared to one's taste.

For the Dutch, Manado was an important port in the Moluccan spice trade. It continues to be so, being the node from which people and goods are moved throughout the spice islands. The little port in Manado is busy with small ships and ferries waiting to take people to islands with exotic names such as Ambon, Ternate, Tidore and Halmahera. The names on the boats belie the Christian world: names such as Terra Sancta and Ave Maria. Indeed, it is in the port that one sees the beautiful women of Manado. There are too many of them to describe, at the quayside, waiting to board the vessels or to see others off. This small port captures all that is fascinating about the spice islands: the people, the produce, the smells, the colour and the evening light. At sunset, the evening breeze on the quay is punctuated with the smells of fish, of spices, of cloves and of ships' fuel oil interspersed with the wafting scents of perfume worn by the women. There are all manner of men: some hardy seafarers, others of a lesser build, all standing around puffing on clove-filled cigarettes. Their faces show the years of miscegenation between the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Arabs and the islanders that have taken place in these parts.

The road to the Minahasa highlands is steep and winding. The coconut palms and mango trees soon give way to mountain vegetation. There are villages and small towns, nestled next to volcanoes. One such town sits beneath a live volcano from which the fumes can be seen rising. Living next to danger comes naturally to these hardy people. There are tracts of rice fields in the fertile volcanic soil. Children walk along the roads with large rats, which have been caught from the fields, hanging from rods across their shoulders. This must be the farmers' enemy in these parts. There is freshwater fish and a string of villages around a huge lake in the highlands. The water in the lake turns violet in the late afternoon sun. The weather is unpredictable here. One moment there is lashing rain and the next, the sun is out with its radiant glow.

Late in the evening we find our way back to Manado, driving through winding roads. As we reach the edge of the mountains the town of Manado appears, spread below the slopes and with a blue bay on the horizon. There are mango trees, sugar cane, jackfruit, papaya, banana groves and coconut palms strung along the road leading down from the highlands. Then, as we turn a bend, a huge statue of a white angel, hands outstretched and her body floating in the air, sticks out from the roof of a large building: a seminary of sorts. The Church, clearly, has been busy in these parts.

Along the road a van has drawn aside, full of children dressed in clothes for a Christmas pantomime. One has his face and body darkened in charcoal, another is wearing a Father Christmas costume. In the hot and humid weather of the tropics this seems so out of place. But Christmas is coming and the show must go on, for this is a Christian refuge in a largely Muslim archipelago.

We watch the last of the sun's rays dip into the sea and darkness descend on the town. At the seafood restaurant we feast on a selection of different fish, prawns, squid and vegetables. The food is fresh and delectable and tomorrow we will come back to sample some more. If only the scuba-diving couple would be more adventurous.

There is as much adventure in Manado and the highlands as there is in the sea. Paradise, after all, exists in many forms. Perhaps, the longer it remains undiscovered the more magical it will become. And, yes, my schoolboy fascination with Maria Manado was never misplaced.

Sree Kumar
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About Sree Kumar

Sree Kumar is an amateur photographer and an essayist with a love of travel. He studied in Oxford, London and Singapore, where he now lives.