

A Year of Living and Learning

Chris Urbanski writes to tell us about his year living in Java while studying Indonesian for his degree in Australia.

A group of JIS alumni were in Jakarta ringing in the 2007 New Year. "Wow! You're so Indo now," smirked a fellow alum following my rendition of the Indonesian pop ballad Yogyakarta, performed on a battered borrowed guitar with a troupe of local buskers in support and awe-struck Indonesians looking on. "I learned this from the street kids I was teaching in Yogya" I replied. While others chatted about their cosy dorms and quaint universities in Europe, or the United States, I realized that I was the only one in the group who had returned to Indonesia for more than just a holiday.

In fact, I had just arrived in Jakarta after 12 months living and studying in Central and East Java. I reflected on a year of study characterised by catastrophic natural disasters, life threatening illness, liberation, excitement and unforgettable moments of beauty, chaos, elation and despair. A year that was more challenging than any I had ever experienced – and certainly the most rewarding.

The Year-in-Indonesia program offered by the Australian National University (ANU) is compulsory for students completing the Bachelor of Asian Studies (Indonesian Specialist) degree at ANU. The program requires students to spend one semester at Gadjah Mada

University (UGM), in Yogyakarta, undertaking language units and immersion courses – regular university courses conducted entirely in Indonesian. The second semester sees students enrol at the Muhammadiyah University of Malang (UMM) in East Java – where recently acquired language skills are put to the test with a semester-long field research assignment and a 10,000 word research report – in Indonesian, of course!

With the guidance of the Australian Consortium for In-Country Indonesian Studies (ACICIS) and the financial support of the generous Australian welfare system, I arrived in Yogyakarta, ready to undertake what I thought would be a fairly straight-forward year of language study and cultural immersion.

As part of immersing oneself in Indonesia, most ACICIS students elect to live as Indonesian students do, in a kost (lodging house/dormitory). Wandering the backstreets of Yogyakarta in search of an appropriate kost is quite an experience. My expectations steadily declined from modest to "I'll take anything with a bed and no visible vermin." My next objective was to get around town like many Indonesians do – and that meant a motorbike.

Classes at UGM were, unsurprisingly, far below the academic standard of Western universities. However, what we learned outside the classroom was far more valuable.

One highlight of the semester was spending several days living in the small Javanese village of Candirejo, near Magelang in Central Java along with other ACICIS

students. We experienced all aspects of village life: agriculture, fishing, animal raising and small industry. We climbed the mountain behind the village, finding cliffs and boulders protruding at the summit, affording spectacular views of the sun rising over Central Java, a smoking Mt. Merapi and enduring Candi Borobudur both in sight. We joined the ronda (village militia) as they patrolled the village at night. We also discovered *jhatilan* dancing.

Jhatilan, is simply incredible to watch. Influenced by the Hindu epics, it depicts a struggle between good and evil. Men bearing large, white horse-head puppets representing good dance in time in the center of the arena, while evil circles them, depicted by trolls and demons with their more chaotic dance steps and terrifying masks. The dancers are fed a rare, fermenting, hallucinogenic fruit that, according to the Javanese, allows them to be temporarily possessed by evil spirits. As the dance goes on, fighting actually breaks out as a horseman tackles a demon, or the horse captain flailing madly with his whip or a troll attacks the closest moving object (the audience included). The assistants are kept busy preventing dancers from killing or hospitalising spectators and performers alike.

The low point of the year came shortly after when the Yogya area was hit at dawn on the 27th of May by a major earthquake. The ACICIS group quickly became an overnight aid organisation, with Australian students buying and shipping large quantities of supplies south to where they were needed.

Days later, foreign aid finally began arriving and when we found that most aid organisations had failed to bring interpreters, many of us volunteered to work with medical and engineering teams in the affected areas. I worked with AusAid to establish a field hospital and

Chris and some of his fellow debating team members at the University of Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta.





Chris helping out following the massive earthquake that hit the Yogyakarta area in May of 2006.

interpreted between Australian doctors and Indonesian patients. I often rode my motorbike into isolated villages to examine the wounded and radio my findings to the AusAid doctors before finding a path into the area for an ambulance.

It is painful to recall the tragedy and suffering I witnessed during that time. However, the one positive to come out of the disaster was the immense feeling of satisfaction and pride that came with knowing the language I'd been learning for about seven years had finally been used to help others and save lives.

In August, I moved overland to Malang to take up the second part of my program at UMM. Strapping my meager possessions to the back of my motorbike, and armed only with a map of Java, I made the nine-hour ride from Yogyakarta to Malang, taking the winding southern coastal road. The danger from insane truck drivers and noxious exhaust aside, the ride was terrific – and the views spectacular. Arriving at a *losmen* hostel in Malang, I was ready to collapse. Malang is a delightful place. The cool climate, shady boulevards and manageable traffic are a welcome change from most other Indonesian cities. Meanwhile, UMM – known as the “White Campus” – is a picturesque sanctuary one might find in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth. The flagship campus of the mass Islamic organisation, Muhammadiyah, the university boasts the largest university mosque in Southeast Asia.

Between orientation, lectures and visits to the scenic mountain towns of Batu and Payung, my time in Malang passed all too quickly. Soon I was on the move again, this time

to Semarang, Central Java where I planned to conduct my field research.

The trepidation and excitement of arriving in Semarang after a bumpy ten-hour ride was overwhelming. As I descended from the mountains to the flat coastal plains of Semarang, I took stock of my situation: no address, no friends and no contacts. I had nothing but a small backpack of clothes and my wits. I felt frightened yet, even more so, liberated.

I went weeks without speaking English. I lived rent-free in the home of a Javanese furniture manufacturer I met at a travel agent’s office. I ate nothing but *mi goreng* (fried noodles) and drank only *Teh Botol*. Yet, I got by.

My research topic was one that found me. Walking through Simpang Lima, the city center of Semarang, one night, I was invited by a tea seller to try *poci*, a delicious, jasmine-infused tea. From that evening, I decided to map, observe and investigate the various interactions of the political economy of the street from the perspective of the simple warung *poci*. As the weeks passed, the community slowly accepted me and I became closely acquainted with what many will never learn about the hardship of the urban poor. As an observer, I shared in their misery and joy – and saw the world through their eyes. Their noble, enduring spirit in the face of destitution was quite simply, inspirational.

The isolation and arduous nature of my field work saw me return to Malang from time to time. A Javanese family who owned several prominent restaurants in Malang adopted me. My *mi goreng* diet left

me sickly and underweight, so it was superb to be welcomed each time I arrived in Malang with the best *nasi rawon* (beef soup) and *gulai kambing* (goat curry) in all of Indonesia.

I submitted and presented my field research report at UMM in December, 2006. It was an absolute delight to see my name on the front of a beautifully bound, 70-page book, written entirely in Indonesian. My last few weeks in Indonesia were spent broadcasting with Jakarta radio station Hard Rock FM. My program, Operasi Spesial: Jakarta (Special Operation: Jakarta) involved venturing to parts of the capital rarely visited by foreigners and completing daily missions – anything from sampling durian fruit in Kalibata to busking with local street singers on the roadside in Mentang. After 12 months of in-country study, my language wasn’t only passable; I could speak confidently on-air in an array of unusual situations.

Yet, improved language skills and cultural awareness were just a small part of what I gained from my year in Indonesia. For the first time, I saw Indonesia from the perspective of an Indonesian. My year took me through a diverse range of cultural practices, ethno-linguistic communities and echelons of society found across the archipelago. It left me with a richer and more comprehensive picture of the country. I realized that Indonesia is far more vivid, beautiful and captivating through the visor of a motorcycle helmet than the tinted windows of a Kijang. u4125605@anu.edu.au.



*Chris was slowly accepted on the streets of Semarang as he wrote his research report on life around the *poci* tea stalls.*