

Leks Santoso Helps Preserve Indonesia's Cultures Through Tourism

A striking figure as he lectures on Indonesian culture to JIS teachers after school in a Javanese *sarong*, traditional cloth sandals with pointed toes and *blangkon* batik hat, Leks Santoso is as interesting to speak with as he appears. His friendly manner belies the fact that he has seen and knows more of Indonesia, the good and the bad, than most will in their lifetimes.

Leks is a self-described jungle explorer, tour guide and entrepreneur who has befriended several ethnic groups in Indonesia and from them has gained extensive knowledge of their cultures. Leks grew up on Java, but travels extensively between the islands of Irian, Kalimantan, Bali and the thousands of other islands that make up this wonderful country. Leks gives a percentage of profits from the sale of the cultural artifacts he collects to help the people of the islands with modern improvements and education. "The only way I can help my people is through tourism," Leks says, referring to the tours he gives of the various areas. "I learn directly from the people, not from books, which have a different perception."

Leks, how long have you been touring Indonesia for research and as a guide? What are some of your favorite destinations, and why?

"I have been traveling throughout this incredible country for over 25 years. My first real trip to West Papua came when I volunteered on a social project with the Indonesian Navy at the age of 19. I have been back to West Papua almost every year since. I started my own tour company in 1990. At that time I was about the only company taking people to the most remote parts of Indonesia. My itineraries always have had a strong focus on learning about the people and their culture. West Papua, Sumba and West Timor are some of my favorites because they have been able to retain much of their traditional culture."

What are some of the problems you see facing some of the remote tribes you have researched?

"Indonesia has so many different cultures and each has their own specific problems. It is very difficult to generalize. Some examples would be that the people in the very remote areas do not have access to good medical care, nutrition, transportation and communication. The most important thing is to access the unique needs of each individual village and then try to work with the people themselves to provide what is needed with minimal change to their culture."

Do you think that tourism has been a good thing overall for Indonesia? What long term affects do you predict as a consequence?

"I definitely think tourism is a very good thing for Indonesia because it is a way to preserve traditional cultures and the natural environment. Tourism provides an income for local people. When people can see that others are interested in their way of life, they have a tendency to preserve it. The goal of tourism should be to help maintain the traditions of a people and the natural environment with minimal impact on the culture and environment itself. When people understand that others are also interested in their way of life and their environment, and that maintaining it can actually help them make a living, these things will be preserved. This can only be good for the future of Indonesia."

What threats do you see to Indonesia's sub-cultures and what can be done to preserve them?

"Without the support of ethical, culturally sensitive tourism, many traditional cultures are in

danger of disappearing. One of the greatest risks faced by these cultures is actually that they are unaware of the potential tourism offers to support their culture and foster their future development. Consequently, as some traditional cultures struggle to modernize, they often lose not only something fundamental about their unique cultural identities, but also one of their greatest economic assets. Tourism enables traditional cultures to preserve their unique contributions to world heritage at the same time that it provides a foundation for their entrance into the modern, globally oriented world."

Will Woodruff
Publications Director

