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Indonesia, Etc.: Exploring The Improbable Nation



Synopsis

“A spectacular achievement and one of the very best travel books I have read.”—Simon Winchester, Wall Street Journal
Declaring independence in 1945, Indonesia said it would “work out the details of the transfer of power etc. as soon as possible.” With over 300 ethnic groups spread across over 13,500 islands, the world’s fourth most populous nation has been working on that “etc.” ever since. Author Elizabeth Pisani traveled 26,000 miles in search of the links that bind this disparate nation. Map; 25 illustrations

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Pisani first came to Indonesia as a journalist and later as an epidemiologist specializing in HIV, living there at various times during a 25-year period. Charmed by Indonesia’s idiosyncrasies, contradictions, enigmas, disappointments, and seductions, she garnered the impression that the nation is “one giant Bad Boyfriend.” Indonesia is a string of more than 13,000 islands inhabited by people of more than 360 ethnic groups who speak more than 700 languages—a cobbling together of peoples and cultures that is a result of colonization by the Dutch and occupation by the Japanese. Pisani (The Wisdom of Whores, 2008) spent a year randomly traveling 26,000 miles around the archipelago, visiting the capital, Jakarta, as well as jungles and small villages to talk to farmers, politicians, priests, fishermen, teachers, soldiers, nurses, and others to capture the heart and soul of Indonesia. She encountered child brides, witnessed young men jousting with javelins, sipped tea at a funeral, and spotted satellite dishes on

the grass roofs of bamboo huts. An intimate, fascinating look at the world's fourth most populous nation, one working to define itself in a modernizing world. --Vanessa Bush --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"Exuberant and wise" | Pisani is an exceptionally resourceful observer of the ongoing battle to define Indonesia. • - Pankj Mishra, The New Yorker
"Beautifully written, richly entertaining." • - The Economist
"A rollicking good adventure" | To read Indonesia Etc. is to grow rather fond of both author and country. • - Pallavi Aiyar, Los Angeles Review of Books
"For anyone about to visit the place, [Elizabeth Pisani's] book is an essential companion." • - Misha Glenny, Guardian
"Intrepid and passionate" | Profound, lasting, a masterpiece of its genre and so much fun! • - Amy Wilentz, author of The Rainy Season and Farewell, Fred Voodoo

Former Reuters journalist Elizabeth Pisani has been living in Indonesia for the majority of her adult life, stretching back since the 1980s. She speaks fluent Indonesian, used to drive around Jakarta riding a motorcycle and now in this book she travels around Indonesia - from NTT, to the eastern islands around Maluku, to the big islands of Sulawesi, Sumatra, Kalimantan then the "main island" of Java - visiting the remotest regions, blending-in with the locals, even participating in numerous hard-labour works and various local festivals along the way (I'm still curious on what she did with that "request" in Mount Kemukus). In every part of the nation that she visits, she describes the local customs, social hierarchy and economy in great detail. She also elaborates on the many problems facing with every single village, island and province - from corruption, exploitation, poverty, inequality, to transportation, infrastructure and even cultural problems. And between the fascinating local stories she also give various facts, statistics and history of this great country to give us the bigger picture ("The ties that binds" chapter, in particular, is world class), and shows how the Indonesia that we thought we always knew, and the Jakarta-centric (and java-centric) one we see daily in national TV, is perhaps just 1/10th of the actual country. Unlike any other western books on Indonesia - like special chapters in John Pilger's New Rulers of the World, Naomi Klein's Shock Doctrine, John Perkins' Confessions of an Economic Hit Man, and even Andre Vltcheck's Indonesia: Archipelago of Fear - who tend to have a brilliant but one-sided view, Elizabeth Pisani can show both the good side and bad side of nearly everything Indonesian and then elaborate in great detail on how it work out in reality. For example, the many corruptions in the country are rightly seen as a bad epidemic by many, but Pisani also acknowledged it as one of the unlikely ties that weirdly binds

the nation together, as a "new normal" way of life, whether we like it or not. Furthermore, like many authors before her Pisani portrays founding father Soekarno as a great charismatic leader, but she also pointed out the messiness of his presidency later on that led to a hyperinflation. She also portrays the "32 years dictator Soeharto" as a great leader that brilliantly tied the diverse nations together for the first 20 years of his presidency, but started to look "dictatorial" (with every stereotypes that come with the label) after his kids grew up. Indeed, reality is a hard-to-swallow concept for a complex country like Indonesia, where the line between right or wrong, and taboo or normal are often blurry. And in this book Pisani taught us that we need to see the many different issues facing the country from many unfiltered angles to really understand what the country is all about. The underlying truth about Dayak-Madura ethnic conflict in Kalimantan, the "religious" violence in Maluku, and the birth of Police-backed extremist group FPI, for instance, are different compared with the way the mainstream media are describing. With that in mind, this book is truly an eye opener, a well-balanced Rosetta Stone for my Western-educated train of thoughts and values, which often struggles to understand the complex reality of my own country. Not anymore.

A gutsy and witty travel book written by an English woman, a former journalist and public health worker. She travels through the backwoods and centers of Indonesia. Years of inside knowledge, personal contacts, language skills, historical, social, and political insights go into the narrative. Memories from earlier trips add a time axis to the trip. I recommend the book. The agenda is determined by a healthy skepticism against religions and politicians, by a commitment to conservation causes, and by sympathies for the underdogs. I assume the book is most valuable to people who have some knowledge of Indonesia. It is not an introduction for novices. For the question that moves most people (which role will political Islam play in the future of the country?), the book gives information that can improve our understanding. The author is not an alarmist, but she is not crazy enough to deal in prophecies. On key environmental issues like deforestation, she is not optimistic. Many chapters about different parts of the country touch the subject of past outbreaks of violence, be it between religious or ethnic groups, or the big outbreak of murder lust in the 1960s. A subject with many explanations, but beyond comprehension.

It was a very helpful book, especially before reading it, I had little knowledge of this huge country. The author travels all over Indonesia, from remote sparsely populated islands in the east to main islands of Java and Sumatra in the west where majority of its population reside. It's incredible how diverse Indonesia is ethnically and religiously, with having many religions and languages. Various

governments have tried to tackle this diversity differently, but increasingly after the onset of democracy the focus has been to decentralize. That's the way to go for Indonesia, give rights and local rule to its distinct ethnicities and people. Another main theme in the book is the dominance of Javanese in the country, and resentment that other ethnicities feel toward them.

Indonesia Etc is a quick, captivating and entertaining read about the Indonesia that tourists rarely visit. Author Elisabeth Pisani is in love with Indonesia and she's clearly demonstrably knowledgeable about the country's politics and its multi cultural, ethnic and religious makeup. Indonesia Etc will challenge a lot of stereotypes that people have about Indonesia, but Pisani does so in her own unique and characteristically whimsical way. Whilst travelling in a broad sweep around the Indonesian archipelago Pisani travels on overcrowded buses, the back seats of motor bikes, rides on horseback and travels on the decks of passenger ferries or whatever might chaotically pass for transport on any given day. In roughing her way around Indonesia, Elisabeth Pisani has created a gonzo journalistic account of her meetups with a whole cast of characters - some of the more memorable who might include members of Indonesia's political class, fishermen, sex workers, transvestites, members of women's groups, handicapped people, police, and dispossessed tribal people of the jungle. No subject is taboo in Pisani's book. And this is where Pisani invites her readers to look at Indonesia in a new and often confronting light. Indonesia Etc begins a little prosaically, but within a few short pages the book really hits its pace and maintains it relentlessly to the very end. Anyone who has ever done any backpacking their way around the world will love this book, and I'd recommend it to anyone who thinks that they might have a flair or interest in writing a journalistic or traveller's tales type account of their experiences in foreign countries.

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