

JAMES PENHA

## In Search of Tigers

It's raining in Way Kanan at the little losmen (boarding house) of the Sumatra Tiger Project, and so I have time to reflect on the recent visit to Indonesia of my brother and his wife. It was the first time in my seventeen years in this country that any of my friends or family had chosen to call upon this archipelago. I had never been sure if that said more about them, Indonesia, or me. "We're coming!" my brother emailed just after Christmas 2008 so I had a lot of time to worry how we'd spend his sixteen days here.

I replied, "Do you want a lazy couple of weeks in Bali and Lombok . . . or shall we see some more of the country?"

"Since we're coming such a long way, let's do it all!" wrote my brother.

My good friend, knowing my sister-in-law's passion for animals, suggested a few days in Jakarta to allow for a trip to Taman Safari Drive-Through Zoo in nearby Puncak. "But why visit an amusement park," I argued, "when we can see orangutans in Bukit Lawang in North Sumatra or elephants and, who knows, a tiger in the wild in Lampung in Sumatra?"

But my friend was far wiser than I in anticipating the desires of my very American relatives. What they wanted from Indonesia was, indeed, a theme park—an antiseptic, five-star, utterly comfortable sort of seaside Indisneysia through the clear plate-glass windows of which would pass, for their amusement, third-world tropical-jungle highlights on conveyor belts.

Those realities of daily life in Indonesia with which we expatriates who love this country have long since compromised made my sister-in-law miserable. Not that she complained. No, hers is the much more insidious demurrer of those who demand the attention of others; she catalogued regularly the defects to her perfect pleasure: slow restaurant service, spicy sauces, bumpy roads, chicken smells, ants, kinds of toilets, states of toilets, lack of toilets, ferries, stares, dampness, milkshakelessness, unmelted cheeseburger cheese, heat, crowds, and—the last straw—the uphill trek to see the feeding of the orangutans in Bukit Lawang all the while bemoaning the cold water and hot rooms in the hotel to which she would be returning.

In short, my sister-in-law couldn't abide a country that wasn't America.

She's clever, though. I found myself all day trying to avoid hearing her litany of miseries by doing anything—*anything*—to bow to her needs. In so worrying about her, I found myself apologizing for what I love about this nation: its simple realities. Whatever else it is, Indonesia is *not* American pop.

Ten days of this culture clash led me over dinner in Bukit Lawang to declare that I didn't think we should all continue to Lampung. The jungle was proving . . . too . . . real for my guests. I suggested that my brother and his wife spend their final six days at the Nusa Dua complex of Hyatts and Sheratons in Bali (the closest there is on these islands to an Indisneysia). My friend and I would go on as planned to Way Kanan in South Sumatra. Different strokes . . . blah . . . blah . . . blah . . .

The smiles all around were those of relief.

If Way Kanan were Disneyland, I would have seen by now five rhinos face to face and have stared down a tiger.

Instead, my friend and I spent the day quietly boating down the jungle river, enjoying the birds' songs, the mousedeer's ramblings, the fishing villagers' hospitality, and the tales of the Rangers working the Sumatra Rhino and Tiger Projects.

The rhinos and the tigers are here in Way Kanan. We might hear or even see them tonight after dinner. In this wonderfully real world, we just don't know.