

Gunung Sempu offers eclectic religious experience

The Bali bombings not only paralyzed tourism in Bali but also hit Yogyakarta's tourist sector as well. According to the head of Yogyakarta's tourism and culture agency, F. Kaswanto, the city has seen a 40 percent drop off in tourist arrivals since the bombings.

Facing fewer tourist arrivals, travel bureaus are working harder to drum up business, including offering more appealing and cheaper packages.

Via-via travel agency, for instance, is offering a religious-themed tourist package to Gunung Sempu. The package promises not only the charms of nature but also to provide a look at the country's religious plurality and ethnic diversity.

The owner of via-via, Belgium native Mie Cornoedus, said he hoped the tour would counter negative views of Indonesia after the bombings.

"Through this religious tourism package, we want to demonstrate that there are not only Muslims living here but also Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucianists and Kejawen (Javanese spiritualists) as well," Cornoedus said.

Gunung Sempu, which is five kilometers south of Yogyakarta, is located near the sugarcane plantations of Madukismo in Bantul.

For Rp 60,000 (about US\$7), a tourist can enjoy the serene beauty of the area and visit the Sendang Semanggi spring. Some people believe water from the spring can heal disease and bring fortune.

Arriving at the site, some people were seen meditating, praising God through *Eyang* (grandfather) Sabdopalon, a supernatural figure believed

to reside at the spring. Under a large tree near the pond, visitors provide various food, fruits and flowers as offerings.

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A woman clad in traditional costume led a ritual. Soon she was possessed by the spirit of *Eyang* Sabdopalon. Visitors who wanted to ask about their problems or their future were allowed to pose questions to the woman.

"We believe in God, *Eyang* Sabdopalon is only a medium since he must be closer to Him," said one visitor. The visitors there that day came from as far away as Banjarmasin and brought home with them water from the spring.

While observing the ritual at the spring, a guide explained a little about Kejawen, which still prevails among some Javanese.

Not far from Sendang Semanggi there is a building that is often used for meditation.

Several Hindu statues including one of Ganesha (the god of science) and Wisnu (the god of nature) dot the grounds. While touring the area, a guide explains the history of Hinduism in Indonesia, from the golden age of the Majapahit kingdom to the arrival of Islam in the country.

Tourists also are taken to a nearby Chinese cemetery. At a mausoleum, the guide described the history of Buddhism in Indonesia. The guide also explained that many Chinese tombs were found on high

ground because these areas were considered more serene and closer to heaven.

Tourists also hear about the history of the Chinese in the country and how now Chinese-Indonesians are free to observe their religious rituals and embrace their cultural traditions.

Close to the Chinese cemetery is a mosque, the architecture of which shows the influence of the local culture. And the fence around the mosque has Hindu ornaments.

During this part of the tour, the guide explains the history of Islam in Indonesia, emphasizing the fact that most of the

country's Muslims are moderate. The guide also explains the general difference between Islam in Indonesia and in the Arab world, including the position of women. Tourists also are shown, among other things, how to perform the *wudhu* (ritual washing before prayer).

Up the hill, visitors find a Catholic church built in Javanese style. While listening to the guide explain the history of Catholicism in the country, visitors get a view of downtown Yogyakarta.

The tour takes about four hours, depending on the questions posed by visitors.

The more questions the longer the tour.

Most tourists, according to Cornoedus, were most interested in the descriptions of Islam and Catholicism in Indonesia. This may be attributed to the increasing attention given to Islam by the West and curiosity about how Catholicism in Indonesia differs from in the West.

With the continued drop in tourist arrivals to the country, not only because of the Bali bombings and the Iraq war but also because of the SARS scare, Cornoedus believes the tour package is marketable, with some modifications and



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adaptations for local tastes and interests. It is even possible that the emphasis on the magical legend of Sendang Semanggi will be more attractive to local visitors.

Tour guides have been specially trained just for this package.

"The training process is challenging because the tour guides have to find information from books, in the library and over the Internet. After finished reading, they discuss the subjects together as well

as giving answers and questions. The tour guides are also trained to avoid hard feeling or being offended by the tourists' questions," explained Cornoedus.

In the future, the tour might be developed into a larger package that would include a visit to Gunung Sempu.

The one drawback is that there are no restaurants or other places to rest at Gunung Sempu, so visitors cannot just take a break and enjoy the sight of Yogyakarta below.



JP/Tarko Sudiarno

A mosque (photo above) and a church (photo right) are among religious facilities located in Gunung Sempu, five kilometers south of Yogyakarta. A Yogyakarta tour operator offers a unique trip to the area that portrays the country's religious diversity and harmony.