



# Three Enchanting Weeks in Sultry Sumatra

*By Don Mankin*

Photos for this article: Don Mankin. Wife Katherine bathing baby elephants

**The young orangutan swung on a vine like an Olympic gymnast just a couple of feet in front of me. From the look on his face it was clear that he was having a great time performing for the sweaty handful of hikers who had trekked through the jungle to catch his show.**

I was in the orangutan reserve on the edge of Bukit Lawang in Northern Sumatra on a trip hosted by Eldertreks, an adventure travel company specializing in exotic trips for mature travelers ([www.eldertreks.com](http://www.eldertreks.com)). The young primate was just the opening act in a



three week adventure exploring the wildlife, culture, natural history and scenery of one of the most interesting and exotic places on earth.

### **Northern Sumatra: Playful Mammals, Unique Culture and Cataclysmic History**

We watched the playful youngster and his mom, who was draped on a branch above us, for about 30 minutes before heading back down the trail for our next adventure—a two hour drive on a rutted, dusty road to an elephant reserve. For almost an hour, a herd of elephants, including two babies, frolicked in the river as my wife, who has yet to meet a large mammal she doesn't fall instantly in love with, scrubbed one of the babies with a brush.

I got as big a kick watching her scrub the "little" guy as I did watching the elephants. This was clearly a day for watching mammals at play.

Our next destination was the village of Tuk Tuk on Samosir Island in Lake Toba, the largest lake in SE Asia. The lake was formed about 75,000 years ago following the largest known volcanic eruption of the last 25 million years, many times greater than Vesuvius, Krakatoa or Mt. St Helens.

On our first full day on the island we took a leisurely boat ride to explore a couple of nearby villages and historic sites of the Batak people, the largest ethnic group in the region. The next two days featured a walk through Tuk Tuk, once a popular stop

on the hippy trail (many shops still sell magic mushrooms) and a visit to the home of a local family for a taste of what life is like for a typical resident of the island.

### **Western Sumatra: Unique Cultures and Cataclysmic History of a Different Sort**

Bukittingi in Western Sumatra, our next stop, was an unexpected surprise. At 3,000 ft. above sea level and surrounded by three volcanoes, Bukittingi has more to offer than cooler temperatures and dramatic scenery. Soon after we checked into our hotel we took a short walk to the nearby plaza. It was Friday evening, after the weekly Moslem services, and the plaza was full of people enjoying the early evening.

As we strolled through the plaza, young Moslem girls in hijabs approached us, shyly giggling, and asked us to pose for photos with them. Everyone was friendly, welcoming and curious, asking us "where you from?" I felt like a rock star. I guess they don't see many fat, old white men in this part of the world.



Over the next three days, we walked through rural villages outside the town, and got a heavy dose of Minangkabau culture, the ancient matrilineal people who dominate this part of western Sumatra, with a visit to the beautifully restored king's

palace and to a family in a traditional style home in a local village.

On our last day in Bukittingi we explored the nearby Japanese Tunnels which the Japanese built with local slave labor during their occupation in WWII. The tunnels end in Sianok Canyon—not a Grand Canyon by any stretch of the imagination but a pretty good canyon, nonetheless, and one that is considerably easier to hike.

### **Southern Sumatra: Mighty Krakatoa and The Rare Pygmy Rhino**

Our next significant stop was the legendary volcano, Krakatoa, off the southern tip of Sumatra. Krakatoa's eruption in 1883 was probably the single greatest destructive force in modern history. All that is left of that earth-shaking volcano (literally) is an arc of islands that were part of the rim of the original caldera. Anak Krakatoa ("child of Krakatoa"), a volcanic island that emerged in the middle of the original caldera in an eruption in 1927, was our destination.

After a rough and wet two hour ride in speedboats, we landed on a black sand beach on the island, then hiked through the tropical brush covering the lower elevations of the island to an exposed expanse on the volcano's flank. A few more minutes of hiking through the rocky lunar landscape took us to a viewpoint where we could see steam and smoke drifting out of the caldera at the top, as well as the

remnants of the original caldera, now steep jungle-covered islands, not that far away.

Our last stop was to the Rhino Breeding Center in Way Kampas National Park. There are less than 100 pygmy rhinos in the world,



## Get the “Best Travel Adventures” of Don Mankin, award-winning travel author

- *Mahout Training in Northern Thailand*
- *Tracking Moose and Mousse on the Gaspe Peninsula*
- *On the River to Angel Falls in SE Venezuela*
- *Whisky, Walking, Wildlife and More in Cairngorm NP, Scotland*
- *Off Road in Montenegro*

**FREE.** To order the Best Travel Adventures of Don Mankin, email: [larry@activeover50.com](mailto:larry@activeover50.com).

all of them in Sumatra. At the time of our visit, seven were in the breeding center. For almost an hour we were able to watch one of the “residents” devour bananas, branches, brush and almost everything in sight in his protected compound surrounded by an iron fence and electric wire.

After our visit to the Center, we took a boat ride up a jungle river to look for wildlife and saw lots of monkeys, birds (blue herons, kingfishers, fish eagles, among others) and a glimpse of a couple of crocs slithering into the water.

### Long, Scenic Drives

The visit to Way Kampas NP ended the trip on a high note. The orangutans and rhino bookended the trip, not just in terms of highlights and encounters with charismatic mammals but also in terms of distance. The trip spanned this huge island, over 1,000 miles in length, almost from end-to-end. That meant that we spent a lot of time in our mini-bus, often on rough, twisting roads.

The consolation was that these drives were usually scenic, winding through dark, green tunnels of overhanging trees and past rice paddies, tropical forests, volcanic cones covered in tangled jungle, and terraced fields of coffee, beans, corn and chili peppers.

We also drove through villages, giving us fleeting glimpses of everyday life—houses up against the road, mosques with shining onion domes, women in colorful head scarves sweeping their stoops, children in school uniforms waving to us on their way to school, men fixing trucks in their front yards, and people selling all kinds of stuff from stalls in front of their homes.

At one point, we crossed the equator and stopped just long to take photos as we straddled the imaginary line with one foot in each hemisphere.

Without the long drives, we would not have been able to experience the full range of what Sumatra has to offer. They were well worth the sore butts and stiff knees it took to experience the vast diversity of this sultry, magical place.



Katherine Mankin with school children

For more information on the Adventure Geezer, visit his website and blog at [adventuretransformations.com](http://adventuretransformations.com).