

The most fascinating aspects of Indonesia

There is hardly a second nation on Earth like Indonesia. Situated on the largest archipelago on the planet, it consists of more than 13,000 islands. The extreme western and eastern points of the country are separated by over 5,000 kilometers. To put things into perspective, this is approximately the same as the distance between Warsaw and New Delhi! Therefore, it is not surprising that Indonesia is a land of contrasts and incredible diversity. In this short essay, I will present some of the most captivating examples of this diversity.

Throughout its history, Indonesia has been exposed to influences from India, China, Middle East, and Europe. Waves of merchants, missionaries, explorers, and conquerors left their mark on the land. They brought with them their religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. To complement this complex religious landscape, Indonesia is a land of great linguistic richness. More than 700 languages are spoken in the country. The largest ones have tens of millions of native speakers. Smaller ones are only known to a handful of people. The island of Papua has the highest linguistic diversity in the world. There might be even more languages there than currently known, since only West Papua is estimated to be home to about 44 uncontacted tribes!

Another unique region of the country is the island of Bali. It stands out as the only Indonesian region whose population has remained largely Hindu. As a result, the local culture is significantly different from that of its surroundings. Unique types of dance, drama and others art forms have evolved here. The traditional Balinese 210-day calendar is marked by Hindu festivals, such as Nyepi, or the Day of Silence. It is the last day of the year. All outdoor activities stop. There are no cars on the streets, the businesses are closed, even the airport is not operating. People stay at home, reflecting on their lives and preparing for the new

year. It is a beautiful tradition, which gains an even deeper meaning in the modern hectic world.

Next to its culture, Indonesia boasts tremendous biodiversity. Many species that live here cannot be found anywhere else on the planet. One of them is the orangutan, a great ape found in the tropical forests of Sumatra and Borneo. It shows signs of surprising intelligence, being able to manufacture tools for extracting seeds and insects. Unfortunately, in the last decades loss of habitat has seriously endangered the species. Coordinated effort of the government and the local population is necessary to protect this fascinating creature. Establishing areas of increased protection, such as the Tanjung Puting National Park on Borneo, is necessary to secure the future of the species.

As I have tried to show, Indonesia is a land, whose magnificent natural beauty is matched by the rich heritage of its inhabitants. What is most striking perhaps, is how the country has managed to gather its people around a single Indonesian identity. This success can be attributed to a philosophy, concisely expressed in the country's official motto: *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. It is a phrase coming from a 14th century poem, which translates as «Unity in diversity». It shows how much the ancestors of the contemporary Indonesians valued tolerance and coexistence of different traditions. This phrase is just as relevant today as when it was first written down. It serves as a reminder to all Indonesians to cherish and cultivate their different identities, allowing everyone to pursue happiness within their own way of life.