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Brush with the past

> By Deepika Shetty

From its rich historical past to its vibrant food and arts scene to its hip nightlife, Indonesia's capital Jakarta offers all these and a whole lot more, says poet and writer Laksmi Pamuntjak, 37. The bustling city of about 10 million people is widely regarded as one of Asia's liveliest cities. Ms Pamuntjak has spent 22 years there. Here are her tips to experience the city fully.

1. ENJOY OLD JAKARTA

Walk around Fatahillah Square (Jalan Pintu Besar Utara 27, North Jakarta). Here you can visit the remains of the magnificent Dutch colonial administrative buildings for no more than 20,000 rupiah (S\$2.70). This is not an entry charge but rather a tip for the buildings' caretakers.

To get insights into Indonesia's rich culture, visit three museums - the Wayang Museum (Puppet Museum), the Jakarta History Museum and the Museum of Ceramics and Fine Arts. For a dose of history and cuisine, stroll to the authentic Baba eateries behind Jalan Pancoran in the Glodok area.

2. EXPERIENCE ART

For comprehensive programmes in fine arts, cinema, dance, music, theatre, literature and intellectual discussions, Ms Pamuntjak recommends a visit to the Lincoln Centre-like Salihara Art Space (16 Jalan Salihara, Pasar Minggu, South Jakarta, tel: +62-21-789-1202). Its facilities include a modern gallery and the city's first state-of-the-art black box theatre.

3. RETAIL THERAPY

For one-stop shopping of high quality local products, head to the sprawling Alun-Alun (tel: +62-21-2358-0890) in the Grand Indonesia Mall (www.alunalunindonesia.com). Expect to find handicrafts from across the archipelago alongside traditional and modern textiles by home-grown designers.

If you prefer street shopping, head to the Antique Market in Jalan Surabaya in Menteng. 'This is perhaps the only theme market that has survived Jakarta's attempts at modernisation,' says Ms Pamuntjak.

4. RELAX TIRED MUSCLES

The Bersih Sehat massage parlour, which has many branches in Jakarta, offers no-nonsense, traditional Javanese body massages for under 100,000 rupiah an hour.

A competent mid-range option is the Javanese royalty-inspired Taman Sari Royal Heritage Spa (33 Jalan K.H. Wahid Hasyim Blok FG/2, Central Jakarta, tel: +62-21-745-9986). It offers herbal and holistic treatments.

For something fancy, try the spa at the Four Seasons Hotel (62 Jalan H.R. Rasuna Said, Central Jakarta, tel: +62-21-2523456), which offers treatments using only organic products.

5. FOOD

Get ready to be spoilt for choice when it comes to food. Visit Saung Grenvil (12A Kompleks Grenvil, Blok AV, West Jakarta, tel: +62-21-565-9517) for inexpensive, custom-prepared seafood. Order the crabs in Padang sauce, mussels in spicy black bean sauce and steamed star garoupa in superior soy sauce. Expect to pay around 200,000 rupiah for two.

Harun Manis (Pavilion Apartment Arcade, Jalan K.H. Mas Mansyur 24, South Jakarta, tel: +62-21-5794-1727) offers refined Javanese food in an upscale, 19th-century Indo-European villa setting. Don't miss the wayu beef satay, steamed chicken in starfruit gravy and balita-balita, a side dish of crunchy fish served with a fierce green chilli sauce. Dinner for two would cost 450,000 to 500,000 rupiah.

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6. LOCAL FLAVOURS

Ms Pamuntjak suggests setting aside a culinary morning. Start around 9am at Gado-Gado Direksi (16 Jalan Pintu Besar Selatan II, tel: +62-21-9253-1495), known for its legendary Baba-style cashew nut sauce-heavy gado-gado. Then move across the road to enjoy the different peanut tastes of the famous rujak juhi (71 Jalan Pintu Besar Selatan III HI, tel: +62-85-8884-13031).

'Then, for the greatest treat of all, amble across to Bebek Sedap Wangi, king of Peking-style duck, whose artificial-looking flaming titian skin belies truly first-rate meat, plump and flavourful without oozing fat from every pore,' says Ms Pamuntjak.

7. SUNDOWNERS

At Casa (above Aksara Bookstore, 8B Jalan Kemang Raya, Kemang, South Jakarta, tel: +62-21-719-9283), you can drink award-winning cocktails amid Herman Miller Eames chairs and restored 1950s modernist Indonesian furniture. For people-watching, fantastic cocktails and French bistro fare, head to Loewy (Mega Kuningan E 42, Central Jakarta, tel: +62-21-255-2378), a Balthazar-inspired, New York-style brasserie across the road from The Ritz Carlton hotel.

deepikas@sph.com.sg

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