

By Sean Edwards

road to lake toba



It was a well planned adventure to coffee origin in Indonesia with some fellow coffee personalities, WBC judge Justin Metcalf, coffee roaster Pat Curcio and green bean broker **Umarah Ahmad** from Hero Coffee.

We took an early morning flight from Singapore to Medan on the Indonesian island of Sumatra. The one hour flight was met by a bustling hot and sweaty Medan airport, that reminded me of Bali airport 20 years ago, with lots of bureaucratic paper work – which seemed an overkill for a country with no real infrastructure. Luckily we were met outside the terminal by **Umarah Ahmad**, a very fun banter, **Umarah Ahmad**, complete with glasses. **Key words for Menacox coffee, one of the larger coffee businesses in this region.**

After a quick bustle through the city of Medan, we met up with **Agnes Sulaiman**, the CEO of Menacox. **Agnes controls one of the larger coffee producers in the Mandailing and Aceh regions. He and his co workers were our gracious hosts for the period of our stay in this region of Indonesia.** We were soon

loaded up in two four wheel drives, and we set off to attack the crazy road system, or lack of it. The loudest horn and biggest ball bar obviously had the right of way as we snaked our way out of the sprawling city, out of Medan and up the mountain route to Lake Toba.

We travelled for a few hours before stopping at a small town for some refreshments. While wandering through the village, we came across a local farmer hand sorting a small mound of coffee that was grown on his two hectare plot. Local villagers would buy the coffee for their own consumption. Many of the small farmers grow a small parcel of coffee trees on the steeper sections of their properties. This coffee would either be sold to local co-ops or be grown for the family's consumption. Most Indonesian coffee is grown in this manner, unlike the large plantations you see in central and South America.

Our road trip took us to a small coffee grower with a hulling shed and a drying patio on the property. We watch some hulling of some newly picked coffee cherries and observed the processing and laying out of the freshly pulped coffee beans on the concrete patios for sun drying. We Aussies amused the locals with our raking skills, which we had picked up from our previous Malaysian trip. You don't realise how hard it is to work in the heat and humidity until you exert yourself with this manual labour. It is definitely something you need to acclimatise to.

We were then given a tour of a small family run coffee plot, where the beautiful leaf Mandailing plants were in full cherry and being picked. The farm not only provides cash crops like coffee, rows of corn are also grown between each row of coffee trees. Other crops such as chillies and tapioca were everywhere on the boundaries of the paddocks. The rich soil was totally utilized for maximum output.

Nearly all the farms we saw were chemical free, and the coffee skins and pulp were the main source of compost fertiliser. The Menacox coffee company has eight full time agronomists employed to help the 3,000 farmers in the coffee growing regions to assist in the farming process. This helps ensure the coffee is grown and processed correctly to give them better production and a higher quality yield. **Upon talking with Agnes about his thoughts on Fairtrade coffee, he was more concerned about sustainability**

in his country. Educating the farmers about business and the quality methods of growing and processing were the most important approach to a good profit return in the future. Menacox has set up trial crops and is constantly introducing new species of coffee trees and the latest farming techniques that can be incorporated into the farming culture of the area.

The next part of our caffeinated adventure took us to Lake Toba, a large inland lake 100 km long and 30 km wide. The steep sides of this volcanic crater hold some of the best Indonesian coffee crops. We were amazed at how the farmers can grow anything on such steep grades of land. Lake Toba has a local tourist destination for many years and is surrounded by all manners and guest houses. Locals flock to the area in holidays to enjoy the cool lake waters. We stayed the night and enjoyed the local cuisine before heading back the next day, north to Medan.

We arrived back at Menacox head office and proceeded on a tour of the dry hulling, grading, sorting and packing process. It was a real eye opener to see how many sets of hands it took to get a 50 kg bag of green bean packed ready for export. The sorting sheds housed hundreds of women, happily gossiping away while their hands sorted the defective coffee out of the final yield. We enjoyed the commitment and passion from every worker, as they happily went about their job helping to produce

the famous Mandailing coffees and other quality regional origins.

The final day finished with a cupping session of the region's finest crops. We were amazed at the freshness of the new pressed beans, the opalescent luster was evident in the nearly blue – green beans. The flavor profiles were very distinctive between different regions of North Sumatra and very unique to what we cup in Australia from other growing regions of the world. The coffees were excellent, and all told their own story.

Would like to make a special thank you for this wonderful experience to Sumatra from Hero Coffee in Singapore and to Agnes and Menacox coffee in Sumatra. I hope I will have the chance to return to see more of this exciting development in sustainable coffee farming in the future.



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