

Indonesia: Country and Culture

Introduction

The country of Indonesia stretches across more than 13,000 islands between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. With more than 220 million people, Indonesia has the fourth largest population in the world, behind China, India, and the United States.

Geography and Climate

The islands of Indonesia were formed along a line where two continental plates meet on the ocean floor. As a result, the islands are highly volcanic. In fact, Indonesia has more volcanoes than any other country on earth—roughly 220 active volcanoes! Although the volcanoes can be dangerous, the soil around the volcanoes is also rich in nutrients, and the rainy, tropical climate along the equator is ideal for farming. Indonesia’s rice paddies produce crops year-round, and other crops include soybeans, sugarcane, and peanuts as well as rubber, coffee, tea, and tobacco.

Many of the islands are covered in tropical rainforest, with a rich diversity of plants and animals. One of the most unique native plants is the *Rafflesia arnoldii*, the largest flower in the world, which can grow to three feet across and weigh up to fifteen pounds. Indonesia also has a diversity of wildlife, including orangutans, tigers, elephants, and a giant lizard called the Komodo dragon.

History

Human life in the East Indies—what we now call Indonesia—goes back nearly two million years to the time of homo erectus, or “Java Man,” whose remains were some of the first discovered from that era. Throughout its history, Indonesia has been a center for trade and exchange of ideas, and the islands still have a mix of traditions today. The Buddhist and Hindu religions traveled to Indonesia from 600 to 1500 CE. In the 1200s, Muslim traders brought Islam, and the religion spread throughout Indonesia, except for the island of Bali, which remained predominantly Hindu. European explorers arrived in the early 1500s, and by the end of the 1600s, the Netherlands (also known as “Holland”) in Europe controlled most of the islands. The Netherlands ruled the islands of Indonesia for nearly 350 years, until Indonesia declared its independence in 1945 after World War II. Indonesia is now one of the world’s largest democracies.



Globe with highlight of Indonesia and Indonesian flag (inset)



Two Komodo dragons.

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An active volcano on the island of East Java, Indonesia.

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The largest flower in the world, *Rafflesia arnoldii*.

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People

Indonesia today is very culturally diverse—in fact, their motto is “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika,” which means “Unity in Diversity.” Although most Indonesians are of Asian descent, the country has more than 300 ethnic groups and around 250 spoken languages. Indonesia developed its own official national language, called “Bahasa Indonesia,” because of the many different languages spoken throughout the country. Every school now teaches “Bahasa Indonesia,” and nearly every Indonesian can speak it as well as another local language.

The majority of Indonesians live in rural areas, and most of these people farm, fish, or create handicrafts. Although the country has so many islands, 90% of the population lives on the five largest islands.

About 86% of the population is Muslim—Indonesia actually has more Muslims than any other country in the world. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by Indonesia’s constitution, however, and other religions include Christianity, Hinduism, and traditional beliefs.

Culture

Indonesia is famous for its high-quality handicrafts, such as wood carvings, stone carvings, and a type of painted cloth called “batiks.” Indonesians also have a long tradition of shadow puppets, in which leather puppets cast shadows on a lighted screen to act out plays. The most popular sports in Indonesia are soccer and badminton, and the country’s team has won gold medals in badminton at many recent Olympics.

Indonesian food is different across the country and often draws on Indian, Chinese, and European traditions. Rice is the main food and is served with side dishes of meat and vegetables that often include ingredients like chili, coconut milk, fish, and chicken.

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Pura Ulun Danu Bratan, an important water temple on the island of Bali, Indonesia.

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Picking tea on the island of West Java, Indonesia.

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Indonesian food, including roasted fish, fried chicken, rice wrapped in a banana leaf, and soup.

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