



Pontianak: *Keeping the Spirits at Bay*

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WITH AROUND 18,000 ISLANDS MAKING UP THE ARCHIPELAGO OF INDONESIA AND A SMORGASBORD OF ETHNIC GROUPS AND CULTURES, THE MYRIAD STORIES THAT CAN BE FOUND STRETCHING FROM ONE END OF THE COUNTRY TO THE OTHER IS ENDLESS.



Left top: Bands and performers hit the stage as the cannon festival gets into full swing.

Left bottom: After being submerged in the Kapuas River for a year, cannons are treated and repainted for another show.

Above: Crowds gather on the banks to get an earful of the blasts and check out the night's entertainment.

My enthusiasm to discover a story beyond Bali's shores was met with curiosity when my partner Sophie told me of an annual festival that was taking place in her hometown, the city of Pontianak in West Borneo. With hundreds of cannons being fired from either bank of a river that ran through the city, the festival celebrated the story of the city's founding; a story that contained ghosts, pirates, a sultan, and, of course, some killer cannons at the centre of it all. This sounded as unique an experience as any to me, so plans were set in motion and we were soon on our way.

Arriving in Pontianak after a Jakarta transit, we checked into the Mercure Hotel and made ourselves at home. Already, what sounded like ammunition and gunfire was blasting in the distance, giving a small taste of the army of sounds that would be bouncing around our brains over the next few days. The month of Ramadan was also drawing to a close, so a fever was in the air that spoke of anticipation, holidays, family get-togethers and the end of a long month of fasting for most. Eager to get some bearings and a visual on what the cannons themselves looked like, it was onto a motorbike to zip around the city streets and head towards the main arena; the Kapuas River.

Sitting smack bang on the equator, Pontianak is a city that was once Borneo's main centre for gold extraction and has now sharpened its earnings on shipbuilding and the production of sugar, rubber, pepper, palm oil, tobacco and rice. As with many industrial type cities and towns across Indonesia, not a huge deal of money has been afforded to create a beautiful cityscape to grab the tourist's eye, but just like getting to know a stranger, character always shines over time and the personality of a place can often be recognized in the faces of those that fill its streets and the stories they all have to share.

Stopping the bike on the Jembatan Tol Bridge it was a clear view down the river, cannons sticking out from the shore on both sides like stitches binding the banks together. Painted with bright yellow and aqua blue stripes to stand out against the muddy water below, they gave a more playful than ominous impression, stationed in clumps of four or five and mostly erected in front of mosques that appeared every few hundred metres, clustered between with homes, jetties and small cafes that jutted out over the water.

Already there were plenty of people gathered along the bridge, as flames were ignited below and cannons were set off in random succession. The most impressive attraction

though was the roar of sound that followed each shot. Ripping through the night like magnified cracks of thunder in a cloudless sky, we could only imagine the force of blows our ears would face the following evening when the official festival took place. We decided to wait until then for the up close and personal experience.

Twenty-four hours later, it was the eve of Idul Fitri and show time. As we arrived at one of the main pier areas it became obvious how big an event this was for the city. The smells of kretek cigarettes and burnt carbide filled the air and thousands of people crushed themselves as close to the water's edge as possible, pushing into each other for a better look at the cannons and squeezing around each other across thin bridges that connected platforms and viewing spaces.

With closed eyes it would have been easy to believe we had been transported to a war zone. Being fired in sporadic bursts, each wooden cannon shook the roots of anything close by and breached the air with a sound that sent shock waves through your system. Had actual ammunition been shot from the barrels, the festival probably would have entered the Guinness Book of Records for causing the most amount of fatalities at a family event since the Roman amphitheatres



Above: The 'main stage' boat rocks its way down river.



Above right: Mixing up tradition with the next generation of sounds.

Right: Spectators have a chance to set off the cannons themselves.

Below left: Who says you can't dance in a small boat?



Below right: The crowd thickens around a viewing area where the Sultan is seated.

Facing page: A new cannon takes shape.



lost their spark, and would have wiped out the entire town in its first year. Fortunately for onlookers though there was no projectile, just a huge flame that burst forth from the muzzle and lit up the night with an impressive flash.

We were quickly herded into a viewing space to find the city mayor, the minister for tourism and the festival manager all seated for the show. Syaiful Azhar who had been in charge of the event since 1995, soon explained that it was held in honor of the founding of Pontianak, the land itself claimed with the use of a well-revered cannon.

Back in 1771, a sultan by the name of Syarif Abdurahman had sailed into the area with a fleet of ships in order to find new place to settle. Having found the Kapuas River, following its coastal path eventually led him to an area he believed suitable to build. While moored though, nighttime brought with it a plague of supernatural disturbances and unnatural sounds that scared both the

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children and the workers. Evil ghosts known as 'pontianaks' lurked in the area. Famous for preying on children, these savage demonic beings were believed to originate from both the souls of women who died giving birth and babies lost through miscarriage. Beyond dealing with these nightmarish appearances, pirates also began threatening the crew and were known to make use of a nearby area for hiding out and attacking ships.

Believing he could kill two birds with one stone, Sultan Syarif decided to fire into the dangerously occupied area, thus raining his vengeance down for a night of retribution. By morning the sounds of horror had ceased, the spirits fleeing along with any pirates and leaving the land safe for resettlement. On that day, the 23rd of October, the sultan named the city to be Pontianak. Fitting indeed.

Before we could go into any more details, the eighth and current Sultan Sy Abdurrahman Al Qadrie arrived and after a privileged introduction, we were shuffled off to jump on board a cargo barge that had been turned into a floating stage, set up to entertain the crowds along the riverbanks. This was by far the best seat in the house, floating along with the main show as huge speaker stacks balanced precariously on either side of us. Rock bands thrashed out everything from Metallica to local pop favorites and young dancers moved through traditional Malay influenced routines. Cannons continued to be set off and fireworks exploded across the sky above us at every angle. As waves of people filled the shoreline to sing along with the bands, boats also filled up the space between us and the shore, rocking under the weight of excited spectators who gave it their best shot to dance without toppling into the water.

With enough noise, lights and commotion being generated to keep the entire city awake and entertained, there was no doubt in my mind that even the most ferocious of ghosts would have fled to quieter waters had they still remained in Pontianak. After lighting one of the cannons myself I was pretty sure my own soul had been blasted back a few lives to say the least.

The entire night was far different to any I had experienced in other parts of Indonesia and certainly stood Pontianak out as a city with a story to tell, whether you happen to believe in stories of scaring away ghosts or not.

With satisfied smiles and ringing ears we headed back to the hotel. It had been a long night of entertainment and despite the cannons, fortunately there were still a few spirits left behind the bar. **FRV**

