

# Hassles to Get a Glimpse of Torajan Culture



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In early September 2018, my wife and I spent 23 days in Sulawesi, one of the largest of the over 17,000 islands that make up Indonesia. Shaped like a giant letter “k” scribbled with an unsteady hand, Sulawesi is an island with vastly varying geographical features and ecosystems and is populated by some distinctly different ethnic groups as well as unique wildlife. But what prompted me to include the island on my bucket list of must-visit places was the unique culture of the Torajan people.

We began our sojourn at Makassar, the capital of Sulawesi Selatan province and the largest city on the island. It is the stronghold of the Bugis people. The Torajan, on the other hand, are found in Tana Toraja, a mountainous region in the north. West of Tana Toraja and separated by a mountain range is Mamasa; its people share much of the Torajan culture.

Leaving Makassar, we decided to visit Mamasa before going to Tana Toraja. Mamasa is 340km north of

Makassar by road, but there is no direct public transport between these two places. We had to break the journey at Polewali, 246km from Makassar. Taking the advice of our hotel receptionist, we took a Grab car early one morning to go to Daya Bus Terminal some 20km northeast of the city but there was not a single bus there. After waiting for some time, we acceded to a man’s suggestion to go in a passenger car. Out

on the main road, the chain-smoking driver spent the next two hours going very slowly and picked up three more passengers. We were on our way finally at 10.30 a.m. Then there was an early lunch break of 35 minutes. When we reached the junction town of Parepare at 12.30 p.m., the driver took 45 minutes to drop off a passenger and pick up a new one. Later, there was another 35-minute refreshment break and we finally reached Polewali at 3.25 p.m.

The driver actually took only 3 hours to cover the distance of 225km from the bus terminal to our destination but, with all that dilly-dally, we were kept on the road for more than 7 hours.

The next morning, a similar car took us and two other passengers from Polewali to Mamasa, 95km to the north. The mountain road was very winding, undulating and narrow and we were caught in pretty heavy rain. Fortunately the pavement was in fairly good conditions though the journey still took over three hours.

After spending two nights in Mamasa, we left for Rantepao in Tana Toraja in a car with a capacity for 7 passengers. Scheduled to pick us up at the hotel at 7 a.m., the driver showed up more than one hour late. There were already 4 other passengers in the car and the front seat that I reserved through the hotel was taken by a woman. The driver used the direct way, going over the mountain range between Mamasa and Tana Toraja. Before this road was opened a few years ago, we would have had to backtrack south to Parepare and then take another road north to Tana Toraja to reach Rantepao – a total of 12 hours. The direct road is shorter but it’s in an abhorrent state due to lack of maintenance. The road was not only extremely winding and narrow but much of it was also unpaved, uneven and strewn with loose stones. We passed through a few tiny hamlets but hardly encountered any oncoming traffic.

The mountain scenery was nice though. We reached Rantepao after spending 5½ hours on the road.

We spent the following two days exploring parts of Tana Toraja on a rented motorcycle and we saw many beautiful traditional family houses known as “tongkonan”.

We were also very lucky to be invited to attend part of a grand funeral ceremony that was scheduled to last 10 days. Such ceremonies are the main draw for tourists from all over the world to this part of Indonesia.

Torajan culture is truly fascinating. It was certainly worth all the hassles to get to Tana Toraja for the experience. ■