

Volcanoes the noisiest of Sumatra's wonders

National Geographic Society

Tigers, elephants, leopards, rhinos, and orangutans live in the vast rain forest of Sumatra. So does the world's largest flower — the 36-inch-wide rafflesia — which can be detected by its scent more than 75 feet away. It smells like a dead rat.

Sumatra has the largest oil and gas fields in Southeast Asia and is a barely tapped storehouse of gold, copper, tin, bauxite, coal, quartz, molybdenum and other minerals.

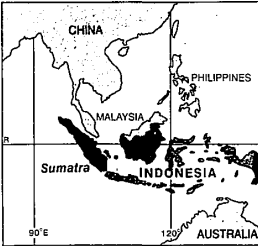
It produces 23 percent of the world's rubber, 10 percent of its tin, and vast quantities of coffee, tea, pepper, palm oil and sisal.

THE WESTERNMOST of Indonesia's 3,000 habitable islands, Sumatra is about the size of California. Its improbable natural phenomena include 29 volcanoes, 13 of them active, as well as a 1,000-mile-long tidal swamp and mountain range.

When the volcanic island of Krakatau blew itself to bits in 1883, the explosion was 18 times more violent than the May 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens. The resulting tsunami, or sea wave, killed 36,000 people in Sumatra and Java.

Since 1927 a smoldering black cone has emerged where Krakatau once stood in the Sunda Strait at Sumatra's southern tip. Sumatrans call it Anak Krakatau, "son of Krakatau."

Besides volcanic ash, more than 100 inches of rain falls on Sumatra yearly. Harvey Arden, who travelled the island from its southern tip near Java to its northernmost point, Banda Aceh, reports: "In the rainy season . . . the skies flush down such



torrents that the roads dissolve. Mudholes ingest vehicles up to the headlights."

In north central Sumatra, Arden stopped at Lake Toba, carved out by an ancient volcano. In the center of Toba lies Samosir, an island within an island and home to the Toba Bataks. Bataks live in ancestral houses — sometimes eight families to a dwelling — under thatch roofs topped with decorated saddle-shaped peaks.

Formerly cannibals, they are peaceful, industrious and lovers of music. Christianized by German Lutherans in the 1860s, Bataks are a minority in an 80 percent Moslem population.

To Moslems, however, "the Christian Bataks are

still notorious," the author reports. "Though they've given up eating human flesh, they still eat pigs and dogs."

THE MOST zealously Moslem part of Indonesia lies further north in Aceh. The few Westerners who visit Aceh are cautioned to respect local customs. "I heard that women wearing shorts have been stoned here, and that men have been 'renounced' (disemboweled with daggers) for dallying with Acehnese women," Arden writes. "But these are the exceptions."

"I found the Acehnese friendly, gracious, welcoming, among the most highly cultured people in Indonesia."

On the western side of central Sumatra lives another of the island's diverse groups, the Minangkabau people. A fiercely matriarchal society, marriage is always proposed by the bride's family and property and family names are inherited down the female line.

The Minangkabau live in extended family units in homes with multi-gabled roofs curved like buffalo horns. "Each gable" marks a room where a daughter of the house matriarch receives her husband and raises their children," Arden writes.

"A child's father has little role to play," a Minangkabau guide explained. "It's the uncle — the mother's brother — who sees to the child's welfare." Many Minangkabau men have left Sumatra to pursue their own fortunes in Java.



An old car is playground equipment for Batak children on Samosir Island in the center of Lake Toba in Sumatra. The Bataks live in dwellings such as the 300-year-old traditional structure towering in the background.

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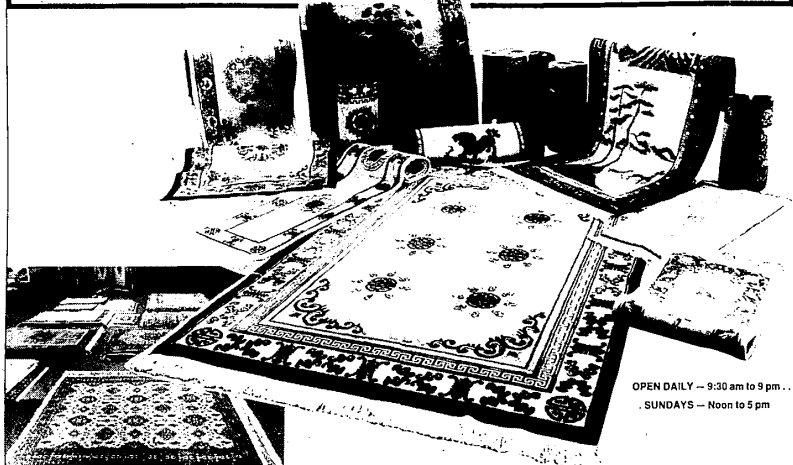
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