

The Unforgettable 12-Hour Train Ride To Jogjakarta

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Exploring Indonesia must include a compulsory visit to the province of Jogjakarta in Central Java, about 560km away from the capital city of Jakarta. With beautiful Javanese culture to discover and ancient historical places to explore, Jogjakarta is also known by many names: Yogyakarta, Yogya, Djogdjakarta, Yogjakarta, but for simplicity sake we shall refer to it as Jogja.



There are many ways to get to Jogja; popular ways include bus, train, car and the most costly but timesaving, flight. Although a flight to Jogja only takes an hour or so from Jakarta's Sukarno-Hatta international airport, my friends and I opted to take the *kereta api* or train ride to the city; it was cheaper

and promised me new things to observe and experience, as this article will reveal.

I would advise you to avoid taking the train ride if you're not willing to spend 12 hours being stuck in a carriage of a noisy train. I had five other Indonesian friends traveling with me and we were taking the night train, so it really seemed more like an adventure for me than it was a nightmarish way to travel. We wanted to leave for Jogja a few days after Christmas but because it was peak season time to travel, tickets from Jakarta-Jogja were completely sold out.

"Karcis Jakarta-Jogja udah habis, ambil yang Jakarta Solo aja deh..."



Not wanting to bail out on the idea of traveling by train to Jogja, we finally purchased Jakarta-Solo *karcis* (tickets) which were still available. Solo is one town and an hour before Jogja, which meant that as soon as our train stops at Jogja, we have to be ready to jump out so that we don't unintentionally get transported all the way to Solo...!

We were willing to pay more for a good train like the *Taksaka* (air-conditioning & comfortable seats for long journeys), but since that option wasn't feasible, we took the "Business" *Senja Utama Solo* train ride and paid Rp.60.000 (about USD\$7 or RM30) each for the one-way ticket. We left on a Sunday night from *Pasar*

Senen station at around 8:30pm, and as we boarded the train I knew this was going to be one unforgettable train ride.

Tolak angin dulu

Before we left for the station, a few of us made a stop at the *warung jamu* to gulp down some homemade *jamu tolak angin*, a type of traditional Indonesian herbal drink mixed with raw eggs and ginger which was supposed to "push away" all wind in our bodies. It tasted quite good actually though I cringed at the sight of the raw egg being added.

Indonesians are big on this whole "angin" or body wind theory: they believe that when one's body is in discomfort, it's due to the excess "wind" in their bodies, so among other things, some *jamu* are supposed "push the wind out" thus curing the body of this ailment. We drank the stuff upon learning that our train had no air-conditioning which meant we would have to open the windows up a bit to allow some air to circulate, thus increasing the risk of our bodies "consuming" excessive wind from the outside...!

Boarding the Business class train

It has been a while since I boarded a train to go anywhere so I was pretty much looking forward to it. We had Business class train tickets but the conditions were anything but "Business-like". The train wasn't exactly in the best of conditions; trash were scattered underneath our seats, the interior looked like it had not been maintained for a while, spider web-cracks

decorated the glass windows, and we had no air-conditioning to top it all off. I chuckled to myself and at the predicament I was in, and considered it part of my quest to travel cheaply and merrily with a bunch of good friends.



My horror-stricken face, however, made its debut when I was told that there was actually another train class *lower* than the Business: Economy...! Apparently in Economy class, three people are put to one seat and sometimes it's hard to walk up and down the aisles because people sit and sleep there too. People with very low income do not seem to mind traveling this way.

So on our business class train (which isn't so bad compared to the Economy class!), we sat two to a seat which could be maneuvered to face the train's back or front; I suppose this seating-arrangement allowed parents to keep an eye on their kids while traveling. Our friends Iin and Rere who sat together moved the seat to face Evi and I to engage in conversation but as the train moved they started feeling dizzy. Fearing that these two would start getting train-sick and start throwing up on us, I told Rere to move their seat back to face its original forward position...!

"Bantal! Selimut! Pop mie! Aqua dingin! TTS..!"



Even on a train, we are not spared of the presence of *pengamen* and *tukang jual-jual*...! Dozens of men, young and old, walked up and down the train aisle marketing their products competitively,

shrilly announcing what they were selling, everything from instant mee noodles, *kripik* (local potato chips), *Aqua* mineral water, pillow and blanket rental (*euw* - I doubt they wash the pillows and blankets; we gasped in disbelief when Iin decided to rent a pillow!), and TTS (*teka teki silang* or crossword puzzles). Feeling bored we bought a TTS booklet for Rp.2.000 but could barely complete the first page - shows you how insufficient my knowledge of Indonesian vocabulary is, even Evi, my Indonesian traveling buddy, was stumped! But really *lah*, the clues given were horrendously vague. And oh, check out the marketing strategy on the cover of the TTS, talk about using women models to sell anything, including crossword puzzles! It's a man's world after all.

Entertainers strummed their guitars furiously as they walked up and down the train aisle and sang acoustic versions of pop-rock songs that were currently popular in the music market. Regardless of their methodology,

every one of these men had one common goal: try hard to earn even *seratus rupiah*.

Now imagine all of this going on for the entire 12-hour ride, even while you're trying to sleep... Not very pleasant is it. We even had a fellow suddenly kneeling down and sweeping the trash away from underneath our seats. He then demanded us to pay for his service which we gruffly ignored. *Siapa suruh sapu? Hehe.*

While all of this selling-fiesta is going on, you may adapt this ability to tune out your surroundings like I did but beware of being too ignorant as potential *tukang copet* or pick pockets might be lurking. We kept our luggage near us at all times and avoided putting anything in the above luggage compartment.

Every time the train stopped at a station along the Jakarta-Solo route, the amount of people trying to sell products would increase triple-fold; local sellers from the town in which the train stopped would suddenly swarm the train and instantly transform it into a true *pasar malam*...! There was no end to the selling madness and it made me realize that it was difficult to make money in Indonesia and that majority of Indonesia's population is still poor.

Toilet-trauma!

I still had one other thing to bear in mind while traveling on the train: don't drink too much water! I've not mentioned anything yet about the onboard restrooms have I? Amazingly I managed to go

through the *entire* train ride without having to use the bathroom; every drink I took was merely a sip to wet my dry throat. I believe it's every person's nightmare to use any portable toilet but what to do if you have to go? Can't exactly fight nature and turn yourself blue in the process can you?

One friend got up to use the toilet in the end after unsuccessfully battling the urge of her bladder; she came out of the toilet looking extremely green and sick (she actually looked better while she was blue). I asked her about the toilet's condition but she just kept quiet, refused to disperse any information whatsoever. She didn't have to say anything though, everything was written on her face...! And judging from the stench that floated from the open bathroom door as people entered and exited the facility, it told me all I needed to know...

Purwokerto: One more hour to go...!

It was wee in the morning when we entered into Purwokerto's train station, perhaps around 5am that Monday morning. We woke up immediately as the train stopped here because it meant that we only had an hour left before we would finally get into Jogja. Bodies aching and eyes heavy due to only about an hour of decent sleep, we sat upright and became more alert than we ever were in the last 11 hours; if we weren't



ready to leave the train when Jogja's station came into view, then it's all the way to Solo for us.

Daylight was creeping in and I could finally make out the view outside: *sawah padi* terraces, coconut trees, lush tropical greenery, small houses and mosques blurred past us. I grew excited at the mere thought of being able to walk on land again and wondered what Jogja would be like in comparison to Jakarta.

Selamat Datang di Jogjakarta...!

Finally we arrived in Jogja at around 7am, 2 hours behind schedule, but who cared! Passengers whose destination was Jogja hurriedly got off the train as though it was on fire, all eager to leave the cramped, musky vehicle. What greeted me as soon as I made my way out of the train were cool, fresh morning Jogja air and the cleanliness of the train station. It was certainly cleaner than the *Pasar Senen* station from which we left! *Salak* fruit sellers and dozens of people waiting for their relatives to arrive from out of town painted my first adult memory of Jogja. Faruk, a friend of ours who attends Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, was already waiting for us since 6am, and we were glad to finally see him.

The first place all of us wanted to go was the station's public restroom, of course! Our wobbly legs carried us there as fast as they could. After that, we decided to immediately purchase our return tickets back to Jakarta for fear of not getting any if we didn't purchase them early enough. This time we decided to avoid the Business class train and bought *karcis* to

ride on the Executive Taksaka, a much better, higher-class train that takes less time to reach its destination than the ordinary train. We paid three times more for the ticket, around Rp.150.000.



As we walked away from the train station, I looked back and saw this bright blue morning sky right above Jogja's train station. Beautiful, I thought. And oh, it's quite interesting to note that Indonesians actually use "STOP" for their traffic "STOP" signs instead of "BERHENTI" like in Malaysia. Simple, *ya*?

Although the train ride to Jogja was less than desirable, it was definitely an eye-opening event that has enriched my traveling experience. I would however hesitate in making a decision to take the same train ride again. Twelve hours on that Business class train was just too long of a ride and has the

prerequisite of very high tolerance that even my Indonesian friends were short of.

So now I've reached Jogja. My Jogja discovery was just beginning...! (*fairy@mahdzan.com*)

Credits:

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