


🌐 Entertainment, Travel & Adventure
in Java, Indonesia

Absorbing

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Delightful travel in central Java begins and ends with batik. It is a process, a textile, an item of apparel.

Some batik forms are still believed to have mystic powers, like the *kain panjang* (“long cloth”). Wipe a crying baby’s face with a bottom corner, and she or he calms down at once. Women use *inding* to keep husbands faithful or attract future ones. Batik is worn in a house or a palace, marketplace or cornfield, and used as shawl or carryall for infants or small groceries. Motifs of the sacred and the diurnal, flora and fauna, India and China and Japan flow within the arabesque of its patterns in colors from muted brown to ruby red.

Batik is both national icon and family heirloom. It is the premier art of Indonesia, if only because it succinctly uses and is used by the others: shadow puppets are dressed in it and have been a motif since the 19th century; dance figures add a sensual element to a design, and dancers wear it in court—especially compelling when Tarun Batik (“Batik Dance”) is performed—and, on a public stage, women dancers embody its erotic suggestions; gamelan musicians and their instruments are abstracted into motifs. Batik is also a genre of Javanese painting.

This array of shapes, sizes and uses began as something made by royalty to be worn by royals and members of the sultanate court. Today, some would say batik is made by women for women. Scholars, collectors and artisans commonly define it as wax-resist

Culture

dyeing. And that’s how I thought of it before I met batik painter Agus Ismoyo.

He told me, simply, that batik is an art of absorption.

Crucible of Creativity

Indonesia affects the traveler on many levels, but none is so profound as the culture of Java. And the heart of Javanese culture beats

clearly in Yogyakarta, known locally as Jogja, and Surakarta, colloquially called Solo.

Lying in the shadow of volcanic Mt. Merapi, Jogja is a hot “crucible of artistic talent and creativity,” as Michael Vatikiotis wrote two years ago in the *Jakarta Globe*. It’s a city that draws in and nourishes artists of all genres. Foundations, cooperatives, and galleries flourish in and near the city. Support of batik takes shape in universities, private showrooms, and entire neighborhoods of workshops. Those interested in batik must begin their education or continue indulging their obsession by starting in Jogja and moving on to Solo, both sites of royal houses in central Java. Another vital center of interest is the north coast, in cities like Pekalongan where sea trade with Europe, Arabia, India and China influenced batik makers since the 16th century.

The court cultures of Jogja and Solo favored subdued tones of indigo blue and *soga* brown that eventually made their way outside the palace walls and into the hands of local batik makers. In addition to natural motifs of birds and flowers common in court tradition, the influence of Islamic culture



Amid the dramatic landscape around Borobudur, classic motifs get colorful contexts from makers like fifth-generation batikist Hani Winotosastro, whose maternal grandparents appear above (1929 photo) in traditional *kain panjang*, and from fashion shows like the one in Solo’s Festival Kreatif Pemuda (opposite).



and art on north coast ateliers assured the widespread use in the royal cities of elegant geometric motifs that forego images of flora and fauna.

Among the many showrooms of Jogja where batik is made onsite is Batik Winotosastro. The head of this house is Hani Winotosastro, a woman who wears her expertise lightly. Batik making has been in her family for five generations. Her father was among the entrepreneurs who formed the first co-operatives set up in Java to assure the health of the batik industry, including reliance on cotton grown in Indonesia. Her commitment to the traditional hand-waxed process of batik includes traveling to international symposia on the textile art. In October 2012, she received an award for helping to support a yearlong course pioneered at SMP Stella Duce 1, a Catholic middle school, in which all 800 students made batik uniforms that they wear.

Thanks to her generosity, I saw the process of making batik done in the workshop located behind the large, well-lit showroom display of varying sizes of batik, including clothing for men, women and children plus interior pieces



like pillow covers and tablecloths.

Simply described, the process is one of impression, immersion, absorption, and fixing. Batiking is a resist-dye process in which areas to be dyed first are not covered, and those to be dyed later are covered in wax.

A pre-made design is applied by pencil to prepared fabric. Next comes either waxing by hand, done by women, or stamping by men. The primary tool of handmade batik is the *canting* (pronounced “chanting”), resembling a pipe with a bowl that has a release spout. Women skillfully apply wax, based



on secret recipes of beeswax and resins, to sections of the design to be dyed later. Wax not hand-drawn by women is stamped with a *cap* (“chap”) by men. Both techniques are painstaking and demand attention. Use of the *canting* tool requires a fluid hand and accuracy. Use of the *cap* involves consistent rhythm and precise alignment.

Next comes immersion in dye, another secret concoction. The waxed cloth is placed in dye baths and later, after the previous wax resist is boiled off, fresh wax is applied to other design areas for subsequent dyeing. An alkali solution fixes the colors. Dyed textiles are dried either by draping over poles or spreading open on the ground.

Preserving these traditional techniques in the face of popular demand for batik, which has led to the use of machine printing, is something Winotosastro is adamant about and active in pursuing.

Also committed to preserving traditional batik but in a contemporary mode are Agus Ismoyo and Nia Fliam, batik painters who live in a quarter of Jogja where silversmithing and batik are the primary crafts. Working in their Brahma Tirta Sari studio with a variety of materials, they create according to personal visions derived from archetypal images and myths of Javanese culture.

Ismoyo contends that batik may be commonly known as an art of wax-resist dyeing but is truly an art of absorption: in painting as well as textile dyeing, images find personal expression in what has been absorbed from





Batik creation ranges from stamping, hand-waxing and dyeing as done at Batik Winotosastro to batik paintings by Agus Ismoyo (right) and Nia Fliam at their Brahma Tirta Sari studio. Creativity also comes into play at Festival Kreatif Pemuda, where iconic apparel gets a contemporary twist.



the artist's cultural community as well as from the universal.

Their pursuit of incorporating the heritage of batik in collaborative painting has taken the married couple to places like Africa, the U.S., and Europe. In Australia, they invited Aborigine artists in desert communities to join them in collaborations invoking dream song images with Javanese myths. The result is hand-drawn textile paintings of powerful expressions flowing together and apart in distinct currents. Locally, their commitment to batik has included support of a women's cooperative based in Giriloyo, a village located 20 kilometers southeast of Jogja.



In the Country

The village of Giriloyo is set amid a range of low-lying mountains running down to the southern coast of Java. Its economic base is agricultural. The women not only work the fields but also are exemplary batikists. Almost all of them make batik to supplement family income. Their women's cooperative, Bimasakti, continues a tradition of craft going back over a century, to a time when women were involved in batik traditions of the Jogja court.

Strolling through this batik village, chatting with the artisans, I saw how batik is a way of life, where livelihood depends on creativity. Women often work from designs catalogued by Mrs. Hartinah, but they primarily create original, intricate patterns in hot wax drawn from remembered motifs or inspired by flowers and plants of their kitchen gardens or crops. In the hills of Imogiri these women





are facing the harsh reality of being on the brink of recognition that may provide the infrastructure needed to give them more time to devote to their art. When I asked how long they work if they have a project, one of the women artists said, “I start soon after clearing away breakfast dishes and stop when it’s too dark to see my hands.”

On the porch of nearly every home, a woman sits before material draped over a wood frame, drawing intensely and blowing on the canting to free the flow of wax, a common sight. One artisan, working in an open-air shed used to store grains, tells us, “I know this work should take me a month



or longer. But I must finish in three days so I can get money to feed my family.” Her work is a complex design of curlicue stems and petals, a graceful composition of light brown wax on white cotton.

Outside of Jogja is another women’s cooperative, in the village of Kebon. The showroom of Batik Tulis Kebon Indah is set amid rice fields and cornfields. Across the dirt road is a house where women sit and work together, hand waxing designs into cloth that will be dyed behind the showroom, along the edge of the fields. One of the women batikists has been creating for 70 years, since she was a child. By chance I happened to purchase one of her works, now my most prized batik. Kebon’s vivacious designs and vibrant colors have a contemporary feel that identifies it as





something of a brand in shops and markets as far away as Jakarta, so the women have been successful in creating batik recognized as unique and reliable as an income source.

Going Solo

The lively city of Solo has two communities responsible for its reputation as a renowned batik center: Laweyan and Kauman. Each is chock-a-block with boutiques, which rarely make batik from start to finish but depend on neighborhood cottage industries. “Factories” assemble the piecemeal work, either fabric that has dried and is ready for further dyeing or that has a hand-drawn pattern of wax. And of course there are those ateliers that do all the work behind the showroom, as in Batik Winotosastro.

In Laweyan, Batik Merak Manis has been operated since 1980 by a man known

Blake’s “Execution is the chariot of genius” aptly describes Batik Kebon Bartisans (opposite), Mrs. Hartinah (above) and her heirloom batik, spirited stamper at Brahma Tirta Sari, and a Laweyan woman painting on batik. The sacred “tongue of fire” motif (opposite and top right) perhaps recalls lava flows from volcanoes like dormant Mt. Lawu.

On the Web

Jogja’s Beringharjo Market and Solo’s Pasar Klewer are often cited as places to buy batik, as is Mirota Batik. Best of all are the creators below, for quality, advice, and the buzz that comes from talking to exemplary batikists who love their work.



Jogja and environs

Batik Winotosastro
Brahma Tirta Sari
Batik Bimasakti

www.winotosastro.com
www.brahmatirtasari.org
www.batikbimasakti.com

Solo and environs

Batik Kebon (email)
Batik Putra Laweyan
Batik Merak Manis (email)
Batik Gunawan Setiawan

batik_kebon@yahoo.com
www.putra-laweyan.co.id
info@merakmanis.com
batikgunawansetiawan.com

throughout Java as a national football referee. In the work area are piles of finished batik to be given as wedding presents: five large pieces, no doubt for bedcovers, two pillowcases, and bedsheets. For four generations, Merak Manis has worked with people living down the street to do some of their color fixing and other work.

Hari Sudaryono, foreman, began in construction but made the change to batik some 15 years ago, all of them spent at Merak Manis. He speaks proudly of the contemporary look of their brand and the atelier's commitment to the community. "It's more than mere talk when we say we work locally. It is a core Javanese value to support others and work in



The appeal of Java batik starts locally, from such places as a Solo fashion show (left), Kauman (opposite), or Batik Merak Manis (above) and Batik Putra Laweyan (below), and crosses borders as well as cultures with an international fashion statement like a dress by designer Lulu Lutfi Labibi.



harmony with them. So, we believe in sharing the work in the neighborhood, where we believe the best workers may be found."


In Kauman, Batik Gunawan Setiawan is known well as an elegant establishment, set up in a house, with a private room for viewing works of distinction that take a year to create. The atelier has garnered, in its 40 years, repeat customers that come from as far away as Jakarta and Kalimantan. Javanese and foreign customers enjoy their elaborate designs as well as batik t-shirts decorated with mythic images—for children and adults.



Java and Beyond

In the haute couture creations of young designer Lulu Lutfi Labibi may be seen another instance of cross-cultural interaction, quite different from the paintings of Ismoyo and Fliam—as well as their collaborations—but similar in its reach beyond Java to international destinations. The 29-year-old Jogjan favors drap dresses, partly inspired by Issey Miyake, and his collections consistently win top prizes in fashion competitions East and West, especially in 2011 and 2012. Batik Winotosastro has joined selling delegations outside of Java sponsored by UNDP and JETRO, and its brand is sold by department stores in the U.S., Japan, Italy and France.

In art and fashion, in dance classes held for young learners at the Solo palace, batik is reaching local and international audiences and inspiring renewed interest. This interest has also sparked an increase in machine-made “batik” that associations, both academic and artistic, oppose by actively promoting

this timeless handcraft that both absorbs and is absorbed into Javanese culture. Deep immersion, like absorption, is manifest on the dyer’s hands and in the eyes of the beholder. 

Getting There

ANA serves Jakarta with daily flights from Tokyo (Narita). Local flights from Jakarta to Yogyakarta take one hour.

