

BIG PALEMBANG THEORY

South Sumatra's capital
is just an hour away
from Singapore, yet it
feels like another world.

Jonathan Evans visits
Indonesia's oldest city
to find out how this
year's Asian Games is
helping propel
Palembang into the
21st century



BINGE IN THE 'BANG

Enjoy a foodie fix in the southern city

Uncle Loe

Indonesian coffee made with love (try the earthy Tubruk), with comfort food on the side, at this hip café.

@officialuncleloe

Kampung Kapitan Seafood Restaurant

Scenic riverside eatery with a stellar view of Ampera Bridge.

f kampung.kapitan.restaurant

RJ's Sports Bar & Grill

Excellent cocktails and a lively atmosphere at Aryaduta hotel's basement bar.

f RJsnew

Mei Mei

Get your fill of Palembang's best-known food, *pempek* (deep-fried fish cakes), at Pempek Candy's in-house restaurant.

f pempekandypalembang



I'm waiting for my luggage in a huge arrival hall at Palembang's new airport, where escalators whizz up and down, and large-scale artworks depict Asian Games events taking place this summer. Signs show the embarkation point for a brand new light-rail transit (LRT) line which has opened just in time for the world-renowned sporting gala. Setting out for the centre in a taxi, I head down the main street of **Jalan Jenderal Sudirman** where there's little to suggest that this city dates back to the late seventh century, when it was the hub of a vastly influential Buddhist civilisation known as Srivijaya.

Instead, I plunge into an atmospheric commercial district lit by curlicues of street lamps and overhead bulbs where stalls fill the pavements of a tree-lined boulevard. The malls here occupy low-rise blocks; government offices, hotels, and restaurants stand at the side of the road; and shoppers chat over a cacophony of revving motorbikes as they stroll towards department stores, vape outlets, and cafés.

It's not until I get to the far

end of Jalan Sudirman, with its **Bundaran Air Mancur** fountain encircled by ASEAN members' flags, that the cityscape takes a turn for the historic. South Sumatra's largest mosque, **Masjid Agung**, is an inescapable vision whose grounds fill an entire block. Building began here in 1738 and its imposing architecture, with twin minarets, dwarfs all around it.

Opposite, the **Monpera** – a contraction of Monumen Perjuangan Rakyat (or People's Struggle Monument) – commemorates the Battle of Five Days and Five Nights that pitched local Sumatrans against the waning force of Dutch colonial authorities in 1947. It's a gargantuan, ominous statue that somewhat resembles a stripped-down Transformers figure.

Finding an opportune moment to zigzag Frogger-style through the oncoming traffic, I veer towards the Musi river and a scene as colourful as you'll find anywhere in Indonesia: the **16 Ilir Market**, where stallholders loudly advertise their rambutan, fish, and fake watches as passersby mill around under a parade of brightly hued



ABOVE:
The stark Monpera memorial recalls the 1947 battle against colonial rule.

CIRCLE:
A captivating flower sculpture called Tugu Parameswara stands majestically under the Palembang sun.

PHOTOGRAPHY BAKA NEKO BAKA



shophouses. I spend only minutes here but I have already received the greeting “Hello, Mister!” over ten times, as well as numerous requests to have photos taken with me.

A ride over the river on the **Ampera Bridge**, though, is an experience to savour. Or even better, walking across it, which while admittedly noisy, affords unforgettable views of the 220 metre-long bridge itself with its giant central tower, as well as the multi-hued fishing boats and riverside settlements below (the city was once nicknamed the Venice of Sumatra). Not for nothing is Ampera considered the icon of Palembang; this monumental vertical-lift construction, painted a vivid red, dates back to 1965, but like the Golden Gate Bridge of San Francisco, which it uncannily resembles, remains a timeless feat of modern engineering.

Suddenly, I’m in Ulu Seberang, the south side of the city, and in another time and place altogether: the tranquil riverside neighbourhood of **Kampung Kapitan**. Here, in the traditional Chinese district of Palembang, a group of kids playing in a neatly kept

courtyard built around a pagoda greet me with a wide-eyed enthusiasm generally reserved for visiting dignitaries. As I walk around the square, a kindly lady asks if I’d like to explore, free of charge, a wooden house which from the outside seems little more than a faded shanty dwelling.

Upon entering, and meeting **Tjoa Ham Hin**’s resident guide, I emerge into a wide-open space lined with sepia photos of former inhabitants. Circling the building, I’m dazzled by a brilliant crimson interior centring on a shrine that’s laden with candles and golden incense bowls. In the next room, spotless lanterns and a vintage chandelier spotlight a living area that’s flanked by images of Chinese deities. The adjacent bedroom re-creates the sleeping arrangements of a 19th-century home, draped with scarlet bed linen. This residence dates back to 1850, but the restoration work is so meticulous and complete that it gives the impression that the residents only moved in last week.

Returning to the riverside, I’m perfectly positioned to photograph the majestic

Ampera from close quarters before driving down another tidy boulevard, and around a captivating flower sculpture – **Tugu Parameswara**, named after a king who in the 14th century ruled Singapura, the precursor of today’s Singapore. It forms a spectacular entrance to **Jakabaring Sport City**, where the majority of Asian Games events are being staged.

A ride around the complex, dominated by the Gelora Sriwijaya Stadium, reveals a sporting venue that could grace any first-world city, replete with eye-catching modern architecture and a beautiful man-made lake for canoeing and rowing. The Asian Games are a matter of significant prestige for Indonesia. The country is hosting the world’s second-biggest sporting event (after the Olympics) for the first time in 56 years, and by all appearances, Palembang is more than adequately prepared.

Just in time for the sporting feast, Jakabaring has been linked to the airport as the penultimate stop on the LRT, a large-scale infrastructure project extending 25 kilometres through the city. The final stop,

ABOVE:
Gelora Sriwijaya, the stadium hosting the women’s football event at the Asian Games, stands inside Jakabaring Sport City.
CIRCLE:
A plush re-creation of a 19th-century Chinese bedroom at the Tjoa Ham Hin house.



Ongah Permata Indah, brings me to my home for the night, **Wyndham OPI**. The city's newest and flashiest hotel flaunts a palatial lobby, decorated in neutral earth tones with a 12 metre-high ceiling and spiral stairway that is positively dripping with bling.

A somewhat older residence is next on my itinerary the following morning. The name of the 300-year-old Peranakan house, **Baba Boentjit**, is familiar to locals, yet few seem to know exactly where it is. So I enlist the help of a group of eager boys ("Hello mister!") who direct me there for just a few thousand *Rupiah* in return, and finally come across a Kermit-green façade on the south bank of the Musi, hidden among a labyrinth of ramshackle stilt houses.

The timing is fortunate: Sunday is market day at the house. So after an engrossing tour of its glorious period furnishings courtesy of guide Adi Budirman, I'm out in the garden watching Sumatran dance and craft workshops, and stocking up on *pempek*, Palembang's famous fried-fish snack with a consistency like a spring roll.

Back on the north bank in the district of **Benteng**, another

craft and food market is in full swing outside the sprawling **Kuto Besak** fortress (1797), in the shadow of the Ampera. Jumping on a ferry, I'm transported 5 kilometres downriver to **Kemaro Island**, a technicolour patch of land in the middle of the Musi that's rife with legends of star-crossed lovers and ghosts.

Its Buddhist temple's montage of red and yellow is a foretaste of the main attraction, a nine-storey pagoda (**Hok Tjiang Rio**) with a golden staircase sculpted in the shape of roaring lions. During Chinese festivals, Kemaro is packed with devotees, but on this Sunday afternoon, I spot only two other people – a monk in the temple and a vendor selling instant coffee by the pagoda.

While Lake Toba remains the principal holiday centre in Sumatra, Palembang's recent upgrades seem set to usher the city into a new era. And with its host of hidden historical hotspots – coupled with new flight routes, plentiful modern malls and even a sprinkling of hipster cafés – there's no reason why this southern capital shouldn't emerge as the tourist hotspot it's always promised to become. **6**

A NEW YORK STATE OF MIND

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Scoot flies four times weekly to Palembang. Book your flights at flyscoot.com



ABOVE:

Diners at Tugu Ikan Belido, a riverside seafood restaurant in Benteng district.