



JAKARTA

GETTING BACK ON TRACK

In a city of seemingly inescapable gridlock, Jakarta's new railway system, unveiled a year ago, has brought relief to thousands of commuters. **Jonathan Evans** boards the MRT to check out the new public spaces and revitalised neighbourhoods along its path



PHOTOGRAPHY DREAMSTIME

As the Indonesian capital prepared to welcome its new Jakarta Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) in early March 2019, the public's reaction remained surprisingly muted. Infamous for traffic standstills throughout the day, the city's population and car ownership had grown at a far quicker rate than its road system could support – a situation not exactly helped by the TransJakarta bus network, ubiquitous Gojek motorbikes, or local predilection for road-hogging black and grey saloon cars.

Yet, in the face of possible relief from such dystopian conditions, free pre-opening trial tickets for the MRT were slow to be snapped up. Stations also remained eerily empty. Many seemed to shrug at the prospect that the MRT, with its 13 stations towards the south of the city, would be remotely capable of fixing the city's chronic logjams – a case of too little, too late.

But by the end of 2019, it was apparent that a minor cultural shift had taken place. Almost 100,000 people per day are now users of the Moda Raya Terpadu (local name for the MRT) train system, with carriages notably full even outside of central areas. Passengers had started to appreciate the many advantages of this Japanese-built system – efficiency, cleanliness, cost-effectiveness, and comfort among them – especially during peak hours. The MRT's desirability was further enhanced by women-only carriages, clear (and bilingual) signage, and top-up zones, as well as lifts and escalators, all measures taken to make using it as accessible as possible.

Covering only a 20km stretch of the city, this is just the first phase of a network that will eventually expand north, east, and west, in addition to a light-rail transit system that will open in 2021, extending as far as Soekarno-Hatta airport. Its benefits also go far beyond serving commuters; neighbourhoods along the line are already enjoying a new lease of life from the enhanced infrastructure around the stations.

RIGHT:
Jakarta's MRT system
offers brand new trains
and pristine platforms.

CIRCLE:
Established local café
Toko Kopi Tuku has
gained quite a following
for their coffees.



LAY IT ON THE LINE

The MRT by numbers.



13

There are 13 stations so far, with seven overground and six underground

56

The percentage of journeys in Jakarta that are currently made using public transportation – hence, the traffic

285

The number of trips made daily on the MRT

3,000

The minimum fare in *Rupiah* for a ride – this is in addition to the 15,000 *Rupiah* deposit for a top-up card, which is refundable after use

16 trillion

The overall cost in *Rupiah* of funding Phase 1 of the MRT (equivalent to SGD 1,548,956,480)

ALL DOWN THE LINE

The MRT network covers a mix of areas that are nothing if not eclectic. Some are destinations known to any Big Durian resident, while others are suburban outliers familiar only to their inhabitants.

On one end of the extreme, Bundaran HI roundabout flaunts iconic monuments including Indonesia's first luxury hotel (now the Kempinski), and the 1962 Selamat Datang ("Welcome") statue, perhaps Jakarta's best-known landmark after the monolithic national monument (locally dubbed as Monas).

On the other, Haji Nawi and Fatmawati are gritty industrial areas that act as gateways to more illustrious neighbourhoods such as the expat enclave Pondok Indah. In between these bookends lies a diverse representation of modern Jakarta that can be explored cheaply using the MRT's easy-to-use top-up card system.

Cipete Raya, for example, is pitched somewhere between grit and glamour, and a fine example of how a neighbourhood can modernise

without compromising its identity through over-gentrification. Along the Jalan Cipete Raya stretch, which lies at a right angle to the MRT station, a haven for coffee lovers and gourmets has sprung up in recent years. Jakarta Coffee House, a standout café, is a micro-roastery which sources its single-origin beans from across the archipelago and brews them onsite amid an unpretentious, intimate atmosphere.

Established joints like this and the President Joko Widodo-frequented Toko Kopi Tuku – with its bright interiors and signature *es kopi susu tetangga* (latte with coconut sugar) – are complemented by The Buya, a lifestyle hub with restaurants, shops, gym, and barber; and Pikul Coffee & Eatery, a box-shaped hideaway wrapped in expansive foliage. Real-estate hoardings around this area testify to its upscale potential, while an exclusive residence set back from the main road, Grange Park, already stands imperiously across from a hybrid residential/co-working space called The Red Corner.

RIGHT:
The area around Blok M BCA station is dominated by Blok M Square, one of the city's most distinctive malls.

BELOW:
While Blok M is known for its Japanese restaurants, it is also a fertile ground for local street food.



GROUNDS FOR OPTIMISM

Two stops northbound, Blok A's landscape ranges from an informal settlement around a market at one station exit (Jalan Kubis) to a celebrated five-star hotel, The Dharmawangsa, a two-minute ride away. Here, too, new enterprises are springing up alongside the freshly laid pavements and cycle paths.

Menuang Kopi, a fabulously hip coffee spot, opened in May (*menuang*

means “coffee jug”), offering a vintage pop soundtrack and stripped-back aesthetic (unfussy stool-and-table furnishing with green plant designs on white walls). In line with a burgeoning trend among Jakarta’s cafés, it also teams up with charities to stage events like clothing fairs which benefit the AIDS foundation.

Ratangga Coffee and Bites, 100 metres down the road, ups the ante with its chic dining area, display of expensive-looking coffee paraphernalia, and tiny outdoor area facing the MRT. It hosted a photo exhibition in April 2019, almost simultaneously with the MRT’s debut. Ratangga was named after the ancient Javanese for “war chariot” – a word proposed by Jakarta’s governor Anies Baswedan as a moniker for the MRT’s train set.

Now that the neighbourhood has become easier for pedestrians to navigate, it seems inevitable that Menuang Kopi and Ratangga will pioneer a regeneration of this otherwise anonymous area.

Blok M BCA, by contrast, is a neighbourhood that has never lacked identity. Its Little Tokyo enclave, renowned for louche nightlife, Japanese restaurants, and Art Deco

architecture, is nestled between three busy shopping malls, including the uniquely bizarre Blok M Square, whose jagged shape and riotous colour scheme are straight out of surrealist artist Salvador Dalí’s worst nightmares. Until now, the area’s most notable claim to coolness was Filosofi Kopi, the café immortalised in the local hit movie of the same name from 2015.

But now, Jalan Melawai VI is getting a refurbishment courtesy of Gen’s Resto & Bar, a swish, after-dark haunt that doubles as a performance and event space. Yamagen, the Japanese-born owner, sublets a kitchen space here to his friend Naruto Takoyaki, who has devised a small-bites menu. Recent events at Gen’s have included an evening for Japanese housewives, a get-together for international rugby players, and a comedy show; and unlike neighbouring eateries, its clientele largely comprises young Indonesians and expats.

“This area is called Little Tokyo, but for me, it is not so Japanese anymore, and not so cool!” laughs Yamagen. “So I wanted to bring in a more international crowd.”

RIGHT:
Former banknote-printing
factory M Bloc Space is now
lovingly converted into a
creative wonderland.

CIRCLE:
Dukuh Atas, at the northern
end of the MRT line, is a hub
for commuters with links to
the airport and the suburban
train network.



A WALK IN THE PARK

Green shoots around
Jakarta's CBD.



At **Istora Mandiri**, the MRT has dramatically opened up the CBD for commuters. The palm-festooned entryway to **The Ritz-Carlton** winds around Pacific Place, a spectacular mall with high-end boutiques and eateries.

With entrances spaced along broad pavements lined with colourful bike racks, Istora Mandiri station also leads into **GBK City Park**, home to the national sports stadium. Here, a new landscaping project, **Hutan Kota** ("Urban Forest"), should inspire pedestrians to explore the green lung's secrets, including **Arborea Café**, a gem tucked away by the Jakarta Convention Centre.

ROOM TO ROAM

Between the Blok M BCA and ASEAN stations, a parkside pavement opens into a broad pedestrianised area leading to M Bloc Space. The abandoned Dutch-era banknote-printing factory is now lovingly converted into a creative wonderland. Along this restored strip, eclectic restaurants hold court alongside fashion stores and artists' workshops. It is an absorbing environment where slow fashion exponents sell one-of-a-kind garments by artisans from Indonesia's remotest provinces; DJs spin multi-genre tracks during festivals; and curators fill exhibition spaces with photography and sculpture.

While the MRT has brought new life to Jakarta's lesser-known suburbs, city-centre hotspots have significantly benefited, too.

Uptown in Dukuh Atas, the MRT has joined a transport nexus that already hosts the ARS rail/air link and Stasiun Sudirman on the KRL Commuter Line. It is now the development site of a spacious pedestrian precinct, Spot Budaya

("Culture Park"), which hosts musical performances and vivid street art in an adjacent underground walkway.

And just a few hundred metres further down along Jalan Jenderal Sudirman, across the Ciliwung River, an energetic scene unfolds. Here, opposite an imposing statue of the military hero, skateboarders are negotiating the colourful curves and ramps of Spot Budaya 2, a new urban park situated just below a street-level viewing deck.

In 2024, the second phase of Jakarta's MRT will connect northerly neighbourhoods, including Monas and Ancol, with Bundaran HI. For now, though, the new line affords a fine opportunity to take a fresh look – speedily and affordably – at a much-maligned city as it turns a new corner into the future. 



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