

TRAILS OF WAR

In Indonesia's Aceh province, a group of former rebels has taken its knowledge of the land and put it to good use leading treks into the province's rugged, jungle-clad mountains. *By* CHAD BOUCHARD



Peaceful Days
From far left: The mouth of the Pucoek Krueng river; two former rebels now act as guides in Aceh.

IF YOU FALL HERE, you will die.” That’s what my guide says as he hands me the end of a freshly cut liana vine, jabbing his machete toward the edge of the cliff. I laugh nervously. He coughs back a failed chuckle. “Please,” he says, in English. I survey the landscape over my shoulder through the green filter of the jungle’s canopy. Layered rows of mountains, looking like shark’s teeth, stretch into the wilderness of north Sumatra. I take solace in the fact that I am not being shot at, as might have happened several years ago, before going over a rocky battlement.

A few hours earlier, I had met my hiking guide Don and his brother Yuni at the mountain’s base. They know these peaks as well as anyone, because they live here. Having spent most of their teenage and adulthood as foot soldiers for the Free Aceh Movement known as GAM, they are the last generation to fight in a long and brutal war for independence from Indonesia.

Their wounds are fresh. And to this day they don’t use their full names for fear of putting their families at risk. Indonesian soldiers abducted and killed their younger brother as retribution for their involvement in the insurrection. Yet he was the only male in the family who was not connected with GAM. Now the brothers are doing their »

FROM LEFT: ANDREW WHITMARSH; CHAD BOUCHARD

best to move on. They have turned in their Kalashnikovs and ammo clips, laced up new pairs of hiking boots and signed up with a tour operator to shepherd foreign tourists into the jungle.

The cathedral peaks of western Aceh are a wilderness trekker's paradise. They include the Bukit Barisan mountain range, a chain of volcanoes, that forms the spine of Sumatra. The "GAM roads" we follow up its precipice are not designed for easy travel. They knit their way through brambles and around crags, making sure I am constantly out of breath. At one point, I sit on a ledge, pull deeply from my water bottle and think about how this trail would be shut down in a country with any semblance of liability laws.

Don is patient but clearly not ready to rest. He shows me a bluish scar where an Indonesian army bullet grazed his hand during a firefight nearby. "The army got to our meeting place first and we fought for two hours. I didn't have a weapon that day and they just opened fire," he says. "We had to keep moving." Point taken.

Further down the path, Don stops to show me the scat of a sun bear, a nocturnal and reclusive beast that sometimes wanders this abandoned valley along with the even-rarer Sumatran tigers. He pokes at the reddish lump of berry husks with a stick, weighing its freshness. A distant screech peels out from the canopy above and he freezes, cocking his head to the side. "Monkey," he says. He tells me the sound we hear was GAM's best alarm system for tracking intruders across the valley, and that the monkeys make a different

sound, more like a laugh, when people get close. "You have to understand monkey language."

Further on, the canopy yawns into a valley, where a stand of stately durian trees marks an old plantation site. Their trunks are still collared with sheet metal to keep monkeys from snatching the crop. The plantation has been fallow for several years, abandoned because of the war, which had been one of Asia's longest-running insurgencies. Wild foliage has taken back the farm. A hornbill makes what sounds like a laugh of its own in the distance.

Yuni disappears for a moment and returns, offering some small, incredibly sour star fruits, a handful of fern tops and a grubby tuber. "GAM vegetables," he says. He explains how a troop of 20 men survived here for several days on nothing but jungle food. So when is the best time of year to live off the jungle? His answer is to point at the durians. In late summer, this famously stinky fruit grows fat.

Guerilla life was clearly an education in fighting skills, wildlife behavior and horticulture. But it did not prepare the brothers for ordinary life. They are not qualified to work in an office, sell consumer goods or hold other good-paying jobs in the city.

After 30 years of a brutal insurrection, peace came relatively quickly and unexpectedly to Aceh. The December 2004 tsunami sent a wall of water crashing over the province's coastal plain, destroying almost everything in its path, a disaster that killed more than 160,000 people in Aceh alone. The insurgency was crippled along with it. By

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Lost World From left: A guide with his *parang*; sunlight streaks down to the forest floor outside a cave; atop Goh Leumo mountain, overlooking Banda Aceh and its harbor.



FROM LEFT: CHAD BOUCHARD; ANDREW WHITMARSH; MENDEL POLS

MAP BY WASINEE CHANTAKORN

the following summer, GAM had signed a peace deal with Indonesia, bringing what everyone hopes is permanent peace to the province.

DUTCH CITIZEN Mendel Pols was living in Aceh in the aftermath of the tsunami when it occurred to him to hire former soldiers to lead hiking trips. He thought that those same mountain-soldiering skills would make them the best, perhaps the only, suitable guides—they are the gatekeepers to a lost world, and lost worlds do not last long these days.

Bringing that notion to life proved to be its own uphill battle. NGO's were reluctant to invest in the project because of its connection to former GAM soldiers, afraid to disturb the fierce sensitivity and resentment both sides of the conflict still harbor against each other. "They just laughed, and said it was a crazy idea," says Pols.

It's only been three years since his guides fired guns at the Indonesian army. The whole of Aceh is still on tenterhooks from old tensions. The guides are friendly with foreigners, but their anger toward Jakarta still stings. Many of them say they would not want to give tours to Javanese people, who make up the bulk of the Indonesian army.

Pols recruits most of the guides in the nearby village of Keude Bieng. He meets them at a grungy coffee shop, because coffee shops, known as *warkop*, are where all business is done in Aceh. During the conflict, this town was controlled by GAM and there is still just a whiff of lawlessness mixed in with the dust. In the heat of the day, rough looking men with nothing to do hang out along the dirt road. NGO symbols that are plastered across the tsunami zone are absent here. The town suffered little damage from the giant waves and has been ignored by most aid groups.

Guides are paid well, about three times the average daily wage for working on reconstruction. They also get cash on the day they work, an attractive advantage over the monthly salary they would receive working for their former commanding officers. "I am proud to do this work," says Yuni. "Many other former soldiers want my job. I tell them to be patient."

Pols also helps the guides' families from time to time. When one guide discovered that his two-year-old son had an eye tumor, Pols rallied Dutch donors to pay for an operation. Aceh Explorer Adventure Tours employs about 20 men in all, though Pols can only use a few at any given time.

The outlook for the business is perilous. Most of Pols' customers are foreign aid workers living in Banda Aceh, and with the lion's share of reconstruction done, the NGO's are pulling out now. Still, Pols has a valuable commodity on his side: this rich and varied jungle, and its history.

Back on the trail, we pass through coffee bushes and clove trees. We kick up the piquant sting of freshly trampled nilam, one of the plants used to make patchouli oil. For a moment,

it is hard to imagine this tranquil place as a battleground. Then I am taken to the remains of an old hideout, and the picture becomes clearer. Suddenly, the jungle around us is full of ghosts. Charred bits of burned plastic litter the ground. I recognize the remains of a makeshift washbasin made out of logs and a tarp. Yuni explains how six GAM recruits held off 30 Indonesian soldiers from the top of this post for several hours before they were captured. Given the number of extrajudicial killings during the conflict, "captured" is probably a polite way to indicate something much worse.

As we head back down the mountain, it starts to rain. The guides exchange a foreboding glance. Within minutes, the sky opens, and instead of hiking, we are being washed down the slope. The dark loam underfoot completely gives way, I'm holding on to a vine, swinging through the jungle, skiing down a small landslide. "Like Tarzan!" I shout. "No," says Don, "Like Rambo," parking the curved blade of his *parang* on his hip like a machine gun. He's laughing, but I wonder if the joke is on me. Rambo is a fighter, and so is Don, but I am just a pale guy who works at a computer and has to stop a lot to catch his breath. It's fun to try to keep up with the soldiers for a day, but in the end I'm really looking forward to a hot shower. +

GUIDE TO ACEH



with a fitness center, pool, spa and Wi-Fi access. *Jln. T. Panglima Nyak Makam*; 62-651/755-5888; hermespalacehotel.com; doubles from US\$103.

Grand Nanggroe Hotel Spacious rooms, a pool and Internet access. *Jln. Tengku Imun Lueng Bata*; 62-651/35788; aceh-hotels.com/Grand_Nanggroe; doubles from US\$55.

Hotel Green Paradise Quiet location about 20 minutes from the city center. *Perumahan Kompleks Puskopo Jln. Ajun Jeumpit*; 62-651/7411-5541; doubles from US\$28.

WHEN TO GO

The dry season in Aceh and north Sumatra stretches from May to September. Wet season conditions are unpredictable, and heavy rain makes some trails impassable. Temperatures range from 25 to 30 degrees year-round.

GETTING THERE

From Jakarta, Indonesian airlines Garuda, Lion Air and Sriwijaya fly daily to Banda Aceh via Medan.

WHERE TO STAY

Hermes Palace Hotel A palatial four-star accommodation convenient for the city center

WHAT TO DO

Aceh Explorer Adventure Tours operates along 25 trails with a wide array of trips available, from three hours to one- or two-night expeditions available. Transport from hotel, water, first aid and a pack lunch are all included. Bring hiking boots or shoes with rugged soles, a long sleeve shirt, sun block, insect repellent with DEET and light-rain gear. *17 Jln. Panglima nyak Makam*; 62/812-698-4216; acehexplorer.com; from US\$45.