

# Sumatra

Sumatra has a land area of 473,000 square kilometres, and is the world's fourth largest island. It runs parallel to the Malaysian peninsula, and is separated from it by the Strait of Melaka. The Bukit Barisan mountains run down the western edge of the island, many of the 93 peaks exceeding 2,000 metres. Mount Kerinci (3,805 metres) is the highest.



Formed as a result of a huge volcanic explosion, Lake Toba, with Samosir Island in the middle, is the largest lake in Southeast Asia. Some scientists believe it may have triggered the onset of the last ice age by lowering northern temperatures by three to five degrees Celsius a year.

» Minangkabau society in the western highlands of Sumatra is based on matrilineal descent

The Sumatran rhinoceros is one of 176 mammals that can be found in Sumatra. It is the smallest of the rhinoceros family, and lacks the tough hide of other species, having a soft, hairy hide.



## The Landscape

Like the island of Java, Sumatra lies over a major fault line and is geologically unstable. In the north of the Bukit Barisan range is a crater lake, Lake Toba, formed after a massive volcanic eruption 75,000 years ago and said to have been the most powerful explosion

in the last million years. To the east of the Bukit Barisan, the foothill region gives way to extensive swampy lowlands, traversed by some of Indonesia's largest rivers—the Musi, Batanghari and Rokan, for example. To the west of the Bukit Barisan, the coast is narrow, and seldom exceeds 20 kilometres in width. A few fishing and agricultural villages, as well as the towns of Padang and Bengkulu, have developed on this narrow stretch of land. Offshore to the west are Nias and the Mentawai islands.

Sumatran soils are generally not very fertile. In the east, waterlogging poses a problem while the foothills of the Bukit Barisan tend to be very heavily leached. Once the land is cleared of forest for agriculture, the fertility of the soil declines rapidly without fertilisation.

The equator dissects Sumatra, and monthly temperatures average between 26 and 27 degrees Celsius. In contrast, rainfall is more varied, and is highest in the western plains and foothills of the Bukit Barisan. Here, rainfall averages about 4,000 millimetres per year, though it can climb as high as 6,000 millimetres per year in the town of Bengkulu. In the central, eastern and northern portions of Sumatra, rainfall averages between 2,500 and 3,000 millimetres per year. While rain falls throughout the year, it is heaviest between October and April for places north of the equator, and between October and January south of the equator. June and July are, by comparison, drier months.

Sumatra has a larger diversity of wildlife than any other Indonesian island. Amongst the best known mammals are the Sumatran rhinoceros, Indian elephant, orang utan and Sumatran tiger. Other species include the slow lori, the

subalpine grey shrew and honeybear, for example. Few species are endemic and the ranges of many species include both Malaysia and Indonesia.

## The People

For an island of Sumatra's size, its population is comparatively small, being about 37 million people. However, areas like the province of southern Lampung with a population of six million, are beginning to suffer the effects of overpopulation. In terms of distribution, while the highlands of the Bukit Barisan range generally do not encourage human habitation, the plateaus and upland lake areas have nevertheless been settled by various groups. For example, the Batak inhabit the volcanic plateau around Lake Toba in the north, and the Minangkabau have settled in the western highlands. Settlements have also developed in the foothills and river basins.

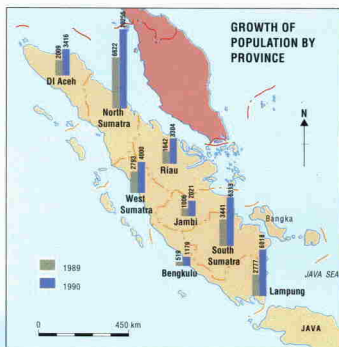
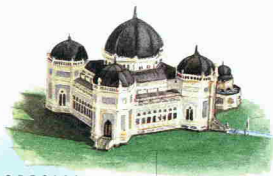
The Minangkabau are a matriarchal society, though at the same time staunch adherents of Islam. The Batak and the Acehnese in the north, and the people of Lampung in the south constitute the other major groups. In addition there are smaller populations of, for example, the Sakai in Riau Daratan and the Kubu in the south, as well as more isolated peoples of Nias and the Mentawai islands, such as the Sakkudai. Many of these small groups are hunter-gatherers. Although generalisation is always difficult, the Acehnese tend to live by rice cultivation and cattle-rearing while the Batak cultivate rice and grow vegetables. The Orang Laut, on the other hand, rely on fishing, and have settled along the swampy shores of east Sumatra and on the multitude of islands that constitute the Riau Archipelago.

Javanese transmigrants have also made their presence felt, particularly in the southern parts of Sumatra, although some have also settled on the west coast and in the reclaimed swamps of the east. In fact, Sumatra is the most important transmigration destination, with about 60 per cent of Indonesia's transmigrants settled here. The majority of migrants from Java can be found in rural centres cultivating crops such as rice, whether in swidden fields, on swamplands, or in irrigated fields, rubber (mainly along the rivers), and coffee.

## Urban Centres

While the majority of Sumatra's population lives in rural areas, there is also a handful of fast-growing urban centres. Medan in the province of North Sumatra with two million inhabitants is the largest Indonesian city outside Java. It is a cosmopolitan centre, with a large population of Chinese descent, and also smaller Indian and Arab communities. Sumatra's second city is Palembang in the province of South Sumatra. It is located on the site of the capital of the once great Sriwijayan empire. Today it has a total of about one million inhabitants.





**SPECIAL TERRITORY OF ACEH**

Banda Aceh

Mt. Gauradong

Gaya Highlands

Mt. Leuser

Simeulue

Medan

Samosir Island

Melaka Strait

**NORTH SUMATRA**

Nias

Batu Islands

Lake Maninjau

Lake Singarak

**WEST SUMATRA**

Padang

Mt. Kerinci

Lake Kerinci

Mt. Masora

Mt. Seblat

Mt. Patah

Bengkulu

Lake Ranau

Melawai Islands

Bengkulu

Sunda Strait

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SINGAPORE

Batam

Bintan

Lingga Islands

Batanghari R.

Jambi

Musi R.

Palembang

Bangka

Belitung

Bengkulu

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Area: 473,606 km<sup>2</sup>

Population in 1990 census: 36.6 million

Population density in 1990: 77 people/km<sup>2</sup>

Population growth (1980-1990): 2.68%

Forested area 1990: 22,696,000 ha

Total arable land 1990: 19,249,000 ha

**SEASON**

**Dry**

**Wet**

**Rainfall**

June-July

October-April

West coast 4 - 6,000 mm

Other areas 3,000 mm

