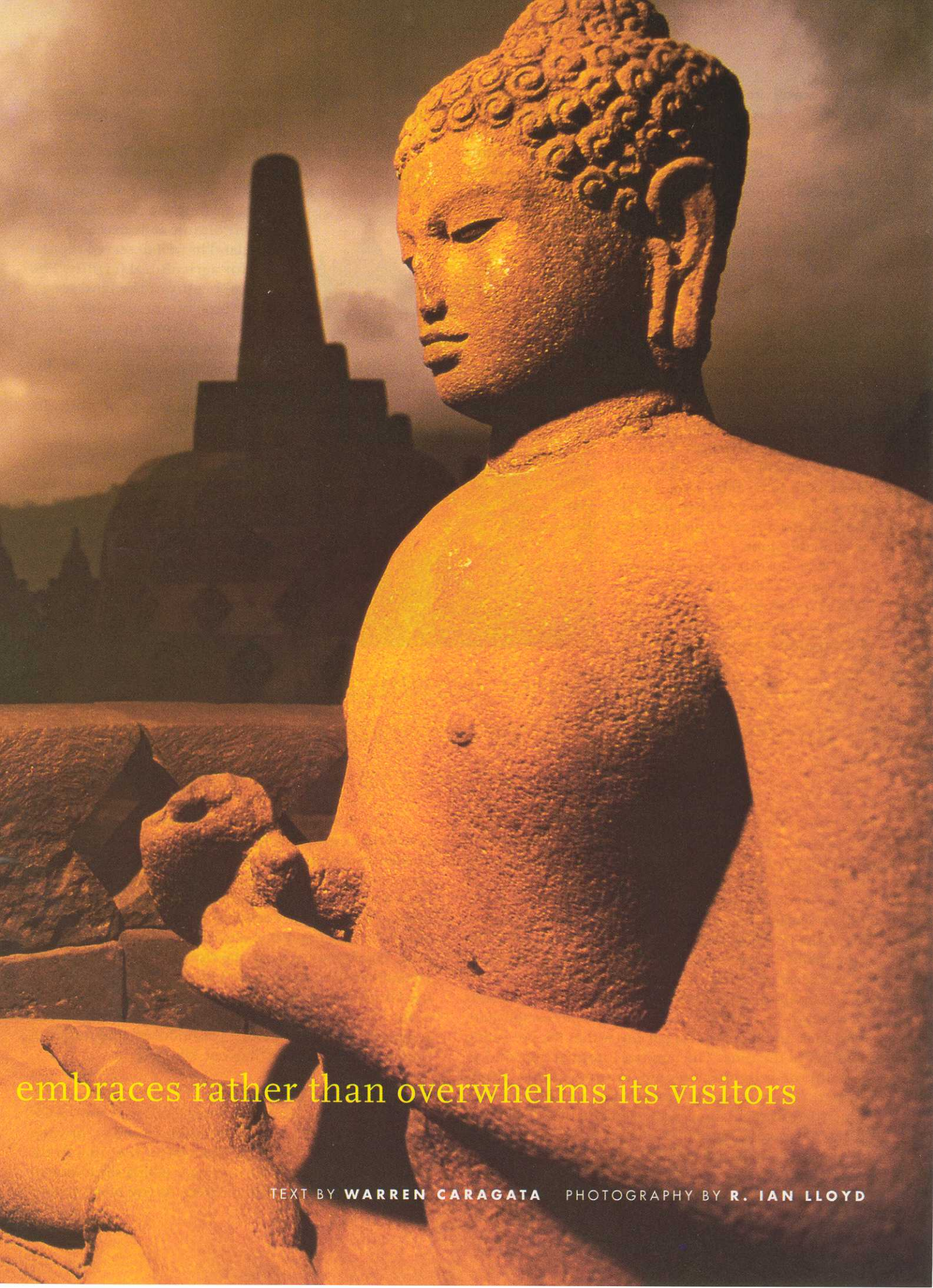


One of Borobudur's crowning Buddhas sits serenely in meditation, its features weathered by the passage of time but its power to inspire pilgrims undiminished. The massive stupa was designed as a gigantic mandala, an aid to those searching for enlightenment.

Borobudur

The largest Buddhist monument on the planet

Beckons



embraces rather than overwhelms its visitors

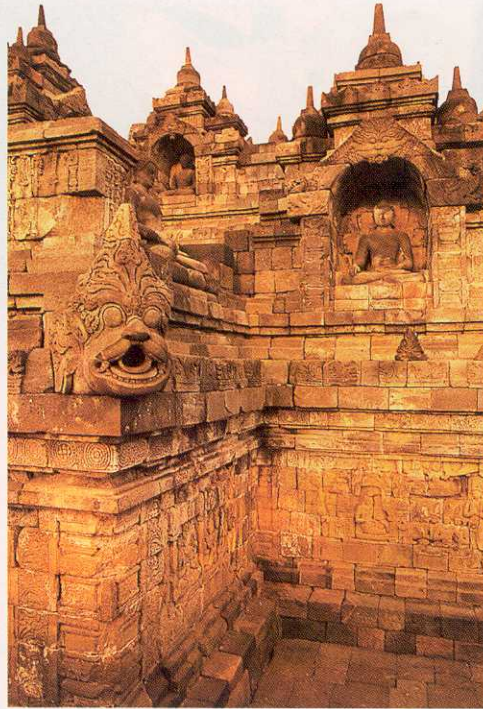
TEXT BY WARREN CARAGATA PHOTOGRAPHY BY R. IAN LLOYD

The most populous Muslim nation on Earth is hardly the place you'd expect to find one of the world's great Buddhist monuments. But on the fertile, mountain-fringed plains of Central Java, rising above the rice fields and coconut palms, is a temple that pre-

dates by centuries Cambodia's Angkor Wat, and is the largest Buddhist stupa on Earth: Borobudur, the Mountain of 1,000 Statues.

Located near Yogyakarta, a city of about three million people that is the heart of Javanese culture, Borobudur is the largest ancient monument in the southern hemisphere, a place of superlatives and mysticism, of worship and wonder. More than a thousand years ago, the monastery here drew scholars from the far-off centers of Buddhist thought in India and China. Today, after years of reconstruction, Borobudur attracts tourists from around the globe.

Borobudur is not the only monumental relic that awaits visitors to Yogyakarta. Intriguingly, the other site, northeast of the city at Prambanan, is of Hindu origin,



the services of a spiritual healer and making offerings to the gods who rule volcanoes or the powerful goddess of the South Seas.

The trip to Borobudur from Yogyakarta offers views of the timeless Javanese countryside: peasants under conical hats sow or harvest rice, and water buffaloes pull plows, turning the rich, chocolate-brown volcanic soils that help give the island its well-deserved reputation for agricultural fertility. The natural beauty of the land seems boundless, requiring something truly special from any man-made structure raised in its midst.

In its appearance, Borobudur is more pyramid than temple, built over the foundation of a hill. Its grandeur sinks in slowly as it emerges from behind the canopy of tropical forest that surrounds it: Borobudur does not impose, but beckons. Its builders did their job well all those centuries ago, as their aim was a creation that would help transcend physical senses, not overwhelm them. And the secret to the power of the monument, the reward for tourists and pilgrims alike, is found at the top.

The true majesty of Borobudur is revealed on the top three terraces, decorated with 72 Buddha statues and open to a vast panorama

built in the same era but some years later than Borobudur. Together, the two temples provide a fascinating glimpse of Javanese life more than a millennium before the birth of modern Indonesia.

The two great religions of India found their way to Java by sea, for then, as now, Java held a strategic location along the maritime trade routes linking India and China (the island is mentioned in some of the earliest versions of the *Ramayana* Hindu epic dating from 300BC).

Hinduism apparently took root first, but by the start of the eighth century both had been firmly established, with each finding powerful patrons within the two ruling families of the time. The families intermarried, and so too did the religions become, to some extent, intertwined. The temples at Prambanan and Borobudur, which date from this time, show elements of both faiths in their construction and stone reliefs. This easy acceptance of what seems to be a peculiar blending of religions is typical of Javanese culture. Even today, Indonesia's Muslims find no contradiction in directing prayers to Allah, using

The complex is laid out as a gigantic walk-through mandala (a graphic symbol of the universe used in Buddhist teaching and ritual); constructed in carved volcanic stone, it contains more than a million blocks cut from a nearby riverbed, each weighing about 100 kilograms. Mandalas are used to help the faithful attain enlightenment and this was, and is, Borobudur's purpose. Pilgrims must make the clockwise journey, moving 10 times around the temple's levels, a distance of about five kilometers. Tourists can short-circuit the process but to see each of the terraces, with their intricately carved stone reliefs depicting stories of Buddhist scripture, still requires a walk of more than one kilometer.

THE RELIEFS, 1,460 OF THEM, ARE THE jewels of Borobudur. At the lower levels they show a life tied to the desires of the flesh, and in doing so, provide some clues about how the Javanese of the time lived, showing, for example, the outrigger sailing ships used to transport spices to distant markets. As you move on and



Intricately wrought bell stupas circle the upper levels of the monument, which lies in the center of the lush Kedu plain. Below: Borobudur's many levels chart the progress from earthly desires to Buddhahood. Opposite: Stone reliefs encompass the lower levels.

up to the higher terraces, the stories concern the quest and attainment of enlightenment.

Borobudur's architecture complements this message of movement from the world of human desires to the world of enlightenment. The lower terraces are walled on both sides, cutting off views of the rural landscape beyond. The true majesty of Borobudur is revealed when you reach the top three circular terraces, decorated with 72 Buddha statues, and surmounted with a large bell-shaped stupa. Here, there are no walls and all of the surrounding and lush Kedu plain comes into view. The panorama and the openness of the platform with its serenely seated Buddhas conspire to create a feeling of contentment. One hesitates to go back down to the world below.

On the east side of the terrace lies a stupa around which a legend has grown: it is said that those who can reach through the openings of the stone enclosure to touch the finger of the Buddha inside will take with them good luck when they turn to leave.

But before making the descent, take some time to soak up the sights. The spirits of Java are now all about you. The near-perfect volcanic cone of Mt Merapi sits, ever-smoldering, in the distance. The spirits of the late sultans of Yogyakarta, one of the last sultanates in Indonesia, are said to inhabit a palace inside the mountain, offering protection for the citizens of the city. Lying alongside Borobudur is a range of high limestone hills, Bukit Menoreh. It is here that the spirit of Borobudur's



architect, Gunadharma, is said to keep watch over his creation, and with some imagination, and perhaps a little faith, his head and chest can be seen in repose, content with the pleasure and joy his reconstructed jewel brings to all who visit it. ✈

China Airlines has daily flights to both Jakarta and Denpasar, from where air connections to Yogyakarta are easily made. An alternative route from Jakarta is via comfortable and speedy executive-class trains that provide wonderful views of rural Java.

For more information on Borobudur, visit the official website at www.vocal.net/twc/borobudur.html