

# IJEN

in the clouds of  
green & yellow





Rain has just covered the hills with a heavy cold steam fog, almost solid. Villages around are still asleep, smashed by the pressure of the day's last storms. The pick-up shakes while climbing the final kilometres of the muddy, bumpy track. Grasping the handle above the window, shaking because of the rocks making the so-called road, I still have in mind the slow motion ferry crossing the stretch of sea from Gilimanuk, entering Java from the east. Sweet Indonesian love songs melting like rose candies, families drinking soda, an eye grasping the last lights of west Bali. How many people in Indonesia are also crossing one of these internal borders? This country is like a huge dashed winding line made of sea channels and pieces of black sand, lush forests and volcanoes.

One second, the door of the pick-up opens one step down, the engine suffocates. Somewhere in the green myst, the car front lights are projecting the shadow of a cloud of ants, termites, mosquitoes and other flying bugs. It is only then that I hear it, not a rumour, not a whisper, but the clamour coming from the surrounding jungle, the oppressive sound of the wild. The feeling of being immersed deep inside a swirl of clatters, a mix of water sparkling on hard rocks, trees rustling and millions of insects, birds, animals



*View from the top of the caldera, the sulphur mine is located 250 metres down. When the wind blows from the east it is impossible to breathe without a wet tissue placed in front of the mouth.*



*Morning walk above the mist, following the track leading to the summit. It is more than warm, the sun is drying the path but it is still muddy, showing prints of last night storms.*

strumming dead wood, leaves, the black and fat ground. Here I am, on the slopes of the Ijen volcano, my feet on a ground which could be the original world.

Glimpse of sunrise, reddening clouds playing with the neighbouring summits of Kawah Ijen caldera, Gunung Merapi, Pendil, Suket, Raung... Birds above rice paddies. The tumult of the night is replaced by the early call of the muezzin, soft, a slow rumour through the forest. Breakfast chimney smoke is rising from the wooden roof in the village below.

The four wheel drive car continues climbing with a lot of difficulties on the wet and round lava stones of the track which splits the primary forest into two. I can catch from one eye, half laughing half frightened monkeys jumping from tree to tree. It is hard to say what the real purpose of my trip is. A stream of events simply pushed me here.

The area encompasses the most spectacular volcano in Indonesia. Even if it is not a hot spot for locals and wealthy expatriates in Asia, Ijen Caldera has been profusely documented. The place is said to be spectacular for the pure demonstration of Nature power of destruction but also for the medieval-scary sulphur mine that the crater is hiding.



To be clear, I am not here for a pure photographic project, there is simply no way I can compete nor dare follow the tracks of James Nachtwey. Nevertheless, a good idea would have been to attempt a real reportage covering the whole sulphur business, from extraction to miners way of living, including the mine and the downstream market. That shall be for later.

Ijen area is a national park. No objection there, considering the fantastic deep forests and the stunning looking volcanoes. Weirdly, the sulphur mine is still in operation. Who knows if there is a real economical interest or if the purpose is to add a taste of photojournalism to the vacation slide-shows of the visitors?

The mine is manually operated in its entirety: no machines nor trucks neither donkeys to carry the sulphur bits up and down from the crater. I am climbing during early morning and the only evidence of activity are the small particles of sulphur I can spot regularly on the ground.

Suddenly, right after a corner, the car leaves the forest and enters a desolated landscape. There the trees look as if they were burnt by some blast, the mud is cracked dried, the only sign of life is the presence of tiny plants that one could think of finding on Mars. The air starts to smell like a freshly sparkled match. Looking upward, the wind is pushing away a cloud of steamy volcano breath.

I meet for the first time one of the miners, eighty kilograms on his shoulders: half his salary for the day, more than his own weight and three times his age. It is his first job, praying for it not to be his last, like most of his colleagues. His legs are literally plying under the load, he is walking down, almost falling at every step.

Two baskets linked by a stiff bamboo cut in half. The load consists of plates of solid sulphur. No one can achieve the way down in one single time, rhythm is given on the track by small nests, a seat carved in stone and a flat area to hold the baskets. They are easy to spot, dust of sulphur is covering the place with shades of yellow.



*Sulphur smoke can be smelled from the top., The black dots are brave men extracting the liquid sulphur from the crater, waiting until it has cooled down and become rock solid to carry it up.*



*In the early morning, on the way to the top, the only pieces of evidence of the mine are small particles of sulphur on the track and, halfway to the top, the weighting station which also serves as a rest area for the miners going down to the parking lot. There, a truck collects the basket content and drive down to the factory through the forest.*

I cannot lift such a weight and neither can I walk onward without sloping on the track simply carrying my camera bag. It is said that some of them can achieve the loop three times a day: two hours to extract the sulphur, a bit less that 90 kilograms on the shoulders, 250 meters up from the crater, 3.6 kilometres down to the truck loading area and then all the way back. On the way up from the crater, no one can escape the fat, horrible, rotten egg smelly smog. A wet tissue covering your mouth will save some of your lungs but after forty years of activity, no one would like to have them.

Finally, after some sort of a sand pass, I can see the crater and the sulphur lake.

There are still two hundreds miners in activity on the slopes of the Ijen volcano. Their work is incredibly hard. Everyday, whatever the weather may be, they will dive into the sulphuric smoke to carry up and down their yellow payload for 0.05 dollar a kilogram. In the best conditions their salary can reach ten dollars per day, maybe six or seven in average. This represents at least five time the average income of the farmers living in the area.

Hope is what brings these men in the heart of the volcano. Their pain brings money and security to their families. Unfortunately, sometimes it is not enough to save their kids from the same fate. I met a twenty years old man, climbing up fast with an empty basket in the morning, his father had been a miner here and died of some lung disease. He had to follow his track. Accidents are frequents and they not only happen in the crater and during sulphur extraction, the track is steep and sloppy and any wrong move, with ninety kilograms on one's shoulder can be a disaster for ankles or knees. Miners prefer rainy days, not for the pleasure of being soaked but because paradoxically it is easier and less sloppy to walk in the mud than in dry dust.

Some years ago it is said that the miners were using donkey to carry the sulphur down but since Ijen area has been later on converted into a natural park, this is forbidden as well as any mechanical device. It was height o'clock when I met the first miner on the track. He was up since four a.m. and



*Resting spots are nested in sand stones one the way down. From here, there is still 3.6 km to go. Some of the miners, tired after a long day of work will stop half way through, sharing some huts built in the jungle, spending the night and finishing their journey in the early morning.*



*The mountain is full of early morning silence, one can only hear the bamboo hoist squeaking between the baskets and the miners breathing with pain.*



already on his way down, just having a rest before the last stretch of straight walk toward the weighting area. He has been doing this fifteen days a month since he is sixteen. Today though, he will only do two trips, his baskets hold seventy kilograms, not like in earlier days when he was able to carry more than ninety kilograms.

Nature here is amazing, through the clouds I can see the other volcano summits, the temperature is cool enough as I am situated up to 2200 metres, in the morning. Looking back I can imagine the sea and the other islands dispersed in it, toward famous Bali.

Only few tourists are climbing these hills. For sure though, the place is exceptional: the blue sulphur lake is a must see as well as the desolate land above the forest. It is worth coming often as the place is very much alive and changing along with the day and the times. the last magmatic eruption occurred in 1817 but phreatic eruptions, with sometimes ash emissions, happen regularly.

Once at the top, the feeling one gets is unique, like being in a place which is not meant for human being, at the crossroads of Heaven and Hell. With altitude, the wind is blowing with power and in a few minutes it can push the sulphur clouds from one side to another, completely covering the horizon. Around the lake, one cannot see any indication of life: no plant, no animal. Only these fierce men, acting as small insects, down at the bottom of the crater, wearing their health thin, painstakingly collecting the yellow blood of the volcano.

I seat on a stone, coughing on top of the track that lead 250 meters down to the sulphur extraction spot. Smoke is now too thick for me to go down, I simply observe from far off the dotted line of miners slowly climbing up.

The sulphur mine activity is raising other questions. It also brings the experience of being at Ijen to another level. It forces into my face the obvious fact that men are working in such conditions for a living. Most of them could be farmers in the same area but they prefer using their physical strength for a higher salary even if it will cost



*The most difficult part is done for him, he just climbed up the difficult 250m rocky track from the lake and is now on his way down toward the forest to the truck.*



*Miners do not have any special equipment. Rubber boots, normal trouser and shirt, a simple cap for the sun and a piece of tissue in their pocket to cover mouth and nose in the sulphur cloud emerging from the mine.*





*three kilometers to go*



*Near the top of the volcano, it's only desolation, dead and burnt trees and rocks*

them their health and probably their life.

The air is getting warmer, the sun is burning my face. It is time to walk down the track. All the way down now is faster than it was in the early morning.

Later, I got stuck a few minutes on the crazy road going down to the village. A truck, fully loaded with sulphur blocks and people sitting on top of its load is having heavy difficulties in negotiating some of the most damaged parts of the road. Rain has taken away the concrete and huge holes make the road barely drivable. Finally I reach the mine warehouse where sulphur is stored before its preparation. It will then be sold to places such as sugar plants or medicine manufacturing centres.

There must be a whole system to pay the miners and to register the weight sold daily. Although, I guess they are independent workers, paid by the kilogram without any kind of social system or benefits.

When out of the jungle, the hills are covered by well organised fields. Sulphur is not the only resource of the area: formerly the Dutch have built here huge fields of coffee and cloves plants which are still in activity.

Then as I continue my trip down, the density of the population increases, villages start to appear, houses get bigger, nicer and at the bottom of the mountains I am back into modern life ...

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Ijen Volcano  
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Printable Deluxe Book edition of this travelogue is available upon request

