

A Mysterious Ancient Palace Slowly Reveals Secrets



Wahyuni Kamah

When the chief executive of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, visited Indonesia October last year, he went to Borobudur Temple in Yogyakarta to watch the sunrise.

Following the tycoon's lead I asked, where is the best site to view the sunrise? "Ratu Boko," answered Ari, my Yogyakarta driver.

Out of curiosity, I asked Ari to take me to the site one afternoon to catch the sunset. Ratu Boko is about 18 kilometers to the east of Yogyakarta, situated at the top of a 196-meter-high hill.

The road to reach the site curves with sharp turns.

"It's challenging for a big bus to pass this road," said Ari. During the hot season all I could see from the road was the villagers' huts on bare soil. "Water is scarce in this area during hot season," Ari said.

The Ratu Boko complex is located across two villages, Sambirejo and Bokoharjo, in Prambanan, Sleman district, Yogyakarta.

As I approached the complex a number of visitors were taking selfies by the entrance. A number of people carried professional cameras to capture the sunset.

The Ratu Boko site's location on the hilltop offers gorgeous surrounding scenery: the Prambanan Temple to the north with Mount Merapi in the background and villages in the area. Indeed a good spot for photos.

The complex has three levels, or terraces. On the first terrace, no ruins remain but the rock wall supporting the second terrace, several steps above.

A 3.5-meter wall of andesite rock divides the second and third terrace. A small tunnel which may have been a moat also marks the division. To the south, I could see scattered rocks of ongoing archaeological works.

A few meters from one of the many second terrace entrances lies the small Temple of White Stones. Stepping to the second entrance, I reached the square in the center of Ratu Boko site.

The breeze blew softly. Before the dusk it generated a sense of quietness and serenity.

Setting it aside from other ancient buildings in Central Java which are mostly temples and for religious purposes, this complex suggests it had once been a grand residence.

It is still not clear what Ratu Boko once was. Only archaeological evidence like inscriptions and artefacts can help to reveal its history.

According to the evidence, Ratu Boko is an ancient archaeological site that has both Hindu and Buddhist influences.

As written in the ancient Abhayagiri vihara inscription dated 792 CE discovered in the Ratu Boko complex, the site was originally built as a place for seclusion and spiritual tranquility, a monastery for the monks.

Remains of Buddhist stupas (structures containing relics, including the remains of monks) were also found on the site.

Ratu Boko is the locals' best-kept secret for sunset and sunrise viewing in the tourist spots surrounding Yogyakarta. The complex offers a wealth of history.
JG Photos/
Wahyuni Kamah

Other inscriptions told that the complex had then become a residential palace of Hindu ruler Rakai Walaing Pu Kumbayoni, a descendant of the Sailendra dynasty, beginning in the ninth century.

Some ceramics from the dynasties of China, including Ming (from the 14th to 17th centuries) and Sung (stretching from the 11th to 13th centuries) were also discovered.

In 1915, F.D.K. Bosch, a Dutch archaeologist, named the ruins "Kraton van Ratoe Boko." The excavation of the complex begun in 1938 and continues.

I stood for a while enjoying the spectacular panorama from the hilltop. When I looked up at the sky, I thought it a matter of luck to be able to catch the sunset as the cloud started to cover the sun.

The signage in the square pointed to the pendopo in the southeast which I would've liked to explore. However, ongoing archaeological works left some scattered rocks making it too difficult. As the sunset approached, my best option was to follow the sign pointing towards the best view.

There are steps leading to the platform. On top is a small open house for visitors to view the surrounding scenery or to meditate. From there, I could see Prambanan temple in the distance.

At dusk, I was almost face to face with the sunset when the cloud unfortunately started to hide it.

Despite failing to catch the sunset it was a nice experience to be in the Ratu Boko complex — named after the local legend Roro Jonggrang.

According to the legend, it was the palace of Ratu Boko (literally "king of stork"), the king of Boko, who had a daughter named Roro Jonggrang.

The legend Roro Jonggrang also explains the origin of Prambanan complex.

With its mysterious background, Ratu Boko site is indeed attractive; the atmosphere, surroundings, ruins, the peacefulness and mystique are something not to be missed.

On the way out of the complex, I stopped by the Plaza Andrawina. This is the best spot to get a breathtaking view of the valley, part of Yogyakarta and different angles of Prambanan Temple and Mount Merapi in the distance.



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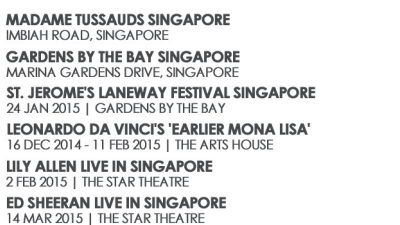
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