

In Yogya's Kulon Progo, Luscious Views and a Clash of the Titans

Nadia Bintoro

There will come a time when you have explored most of Yogyakarta, down to the tiniest temples, and have passed for the umpteenth time the tourist-packed street of Malioboro. And yet, you simply long for more.

On a recent visit, I found Yogyakarta filled with too much color and noise. I just wanted to engulf myself in the serenity of the traditional charms it was once famous for. Fueled by this intent, I made my way to Kulon Progo, a satellite city some 25 kilometers from Yogyakarta amid the tranquil landscape of the Menoreh hills.

What was once a sleepy village, Kulon Progo has become a place of picturesque beauty and a popular tourist destination, thanks to heavy promotion on social media.

Located at the far west of Yogyakarta, Kulon Progo is bordered by the Menoreh hills at its northwest, while its south is composed of lowland leading to the ocean. A single visit to Kulon Progo, when done properly, will result in a complete experience of natural scenery, from hilly landscape to breathtaking beaches.

To reach this village from Yogyakarta, it is advisable to rent a car with an experienced driver. Not only are the roads winding, with no signs for directions, they are also often hilly with sharp turns, requiring expert skills to navigate.

I departed from Yogyakarta early in the morning, when the traffic was empty, and we soon arrived at the gate of the Sermo dam. This man-made reservoir is also a part of the Kali Biru National Park and supplies water to Yogyakarta and surrounding areas. As we arrived at the national park's trekking route, the warm rays of the early morning sun came as a stark contrast to the chilly air.

Located 450 meters above sea level, Kali Biru is blessed with a temperate climate that foster the dense and lush vegetation. Tall trees paved the path from the parking lot all the way into the forest. Along the way, we spot several houses and bungalows built in harmony with nature, but we knew that wasn't always the case.

Ravaged by deforestation, this area was once dry and bare. A local initiative managed to bring this area back to greenery, replanting trees in a reforestation program. The area is now protected as a national park.

Spanning 29 hectares, Kali Biru hosts a variety of flora that make up the dense green canopy. With very few people around, a trek around this area becomes very enjoyable.

If the adrenaline kicks in and you want something a bit more daring, you can try tree-climbing. The park operator has built a few tree houses among the highest trees to take in the view. One is even designed for a photo opportunity and vis-

itors must line up starting from 9 a.m. to get their photo taken on top.

I took my time climbing the tree, and once I was on top, I was rewarded with a breathtaking view of the Menoreh hills and Sermo dam on the distant horizon. The water does look blue from afar, which was probably how Kali Biru (Blue River) got its name. A view of the lush tropical forest cradling the dam, complete with a hint of white mist, made for an unforgettable scene.

My next destination in the Kulon Progo area was the Kiskendo cave, which is little known among most tourists. As we drove away from the forest, we made several stops to ask locals for direction. As it turned out, many of them didn't know about the cave either. Apparently, for locals, the cave goes by many names, from Kiskendo to Ciscenda to Kriskendo.

We drove uphill and down before we finally arrived at the cave. There are Ramayana relics carved outside the entrance, which shows its importance to the local Hindu population. Some relics are easily visible on the limestone hills, while others are engulfed by the massive roots of banyan trees. Unfortunately, we were unable to find a guide to explain what those relics meant.

The cave was pitch dark, which prompted us initially to beat a hasty retreat from the scary interior. But on our second attempt, we relied on the dim lights from our mobile phones to venture deeper into the cave. There is a concrete set of stairs at the mouth of the cave, and massive stalactites hang from the ceilings. The further in we went, the cooler the temperature got.

Many believe that the cave hides a magical portal to another world. Legend has it that Kiskendo was once the home to the two giant brothers Mahesasura, depicted as having a bull's head, and Lembusura, with cow's head. In Ramayana folklore, the cave is where the famous fight the brothers and the monkey-faced warriors Subali and Sugriwa took place. The story of the fight, complete with intricate details of betrayal and misunderstanding, is depicted on the limestone wall outside the cave.

Many people also claimed to have seen a tongue-shaped rock inside the cave, which they believe once belonged to Mahesasura before it was severed by Subali.

It's hard to believe that such a mystical and violent fight ever took place in that tranquil place. But for its mystical aura and sacred status, the Kiskendo cave has become a popular spot for spiritual meditation among locals.

I left Kulon Progo with a strong affection for the village. I am awed by its subtle charms, lush greenery and honest smiles from the villagers. For me, these are enough reasons to come back and explore some more. I believe this land has so many more stories to tell. Hopefully, next time it will not involve any mystical fights between deities.



Enjoying the view of the Menoreh hills, above. JG Photos/Nadia Bintoro

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