

Youthful Bandung

Joanne Poh finds character and action in West Java's capital city

THE visitor to Bandung often feels like he has stepped into a time machine and then emerged – except that instead of being greeted by transformed surroundings, he discovers it is he who has been transformed, and is now a teenager again.

Bandung, the capital of West Java and Indonesia's third largest city, has a youthful, rebellious spirit, is self-possessed and contemptuous of all artifice. It doesn't try to be pretty, it doesn't care what you think and it manages to be bold and brooding at the same time – if Bandung were a person, you can pretty much bet it would have tittering high school girls at its feet.

Popular hangout

Officially known as Jalan Ir. H. Juanda but referred to by the locals as Jalan Dago, the street that stretches from north to south lies in the heart of Bandung and, to many, is the pulse of the city.

In the afternoons, Jalan Dago is sunbaked and sleepy, but come nightfall on weekends, it is transformed by a cacophony of lights and sounds.

On Friday and Saturday nights, the young and fashionable inhabitants of Bandung, joined by their peers from Jakarta, throng the pavements of Jalan Dago.

Motorcycles and mopeds are a popular form of transport in Bandung. To the young people here, these bikes are more than mere vessels of transport – they are an extension of personal identity. The pavements are crammed with a plethora of bikes, from giant sportbikes to vintage-style scooters, and these two-wheelers prove Bandung youth spare no expense in modifying and decorating their vehicles.

On weekend evenings, a row of sportbikes is parked on the pavement in front of Plaza Dago, one of Jalan Dago's major youth hangouts, housing a sprawling

pool parlour, a tattoo parlour, a shop peddling motorbike paraphernalia and a punkish-looking hair salon. The outdoor terrace of a bar proffering beer and shisha overlooks the Kawasaki and Honda sportbikes, draped with leather jackets and adorned with full-face helmets complete with race-replica decals.

Parked more unobtrusively in the interstices between shopping malls are a motley crew of bikes and scooters, from vintage Vespa scooters plastered with all manner of decals to Harley-style cruisers bedecked in studs and leather.

However, Jalan Dago's most arresting weekend feature is most definitely the flock of youths milling about the streets in their leather jackets and sneakers, toting their motorbike helmets and guitars. A gaggle of teenage boys perch on the divider between lanes in the middle of the road, a guitar in the hands of one and a raucous song on the lips of the others. Modified cars with roaring exhausts blast techno music as they inch along the jammed thoroughfare.

Barefoot in the park
After a night out on the town, the youths of Bandung congregate at Dago Park (Jalan Cikapayang) on Sunday morning. Located at the corner of an enormous traffic junction, the park offers young locals the chance to use what seems to be a prodigious talent of turning any public space into an opportunity for fun.

In the stifling heat of the afternoon sun, boys in skinny jeans, trucker caps and Vans sneakers practise jumps on their skateboards. Those boys who have not mastered a particular trick to their satisfaction make repeated attempts at nailing it with a tenacity that is both amusing and heartrending. A few of the skateboarders prefer to turn their attention to the bashful girls in hi-



Hawkers selling assorted local snacks congregate at the entrance of Dago Park. PHOTOS: JOANNE POH

jabs watching giggling from the sidelines.

A pet reptile interest group hosts occasional meetings on a patch of lawn in the park. A group of young men and women lounge in the grass, all manner of snakes, lizards and iguanas draped over their shoulders. Several small pythons chill out, unmoving, on the grass as their owners sit nonchalantly alongside. A fluorescent green lizard peers out, unblinking, from the safety of its owner's lap.

Hawkers selling assorted local snacks congregate at the entrance of the park. Stallholders squatting beside little more than a portable stove and packets of the infamous Indomie brand of instant noodles ensure that hungry stomachs are appeased within minutes at a low price.

Café society

While café culture as it is commonly conceived has not

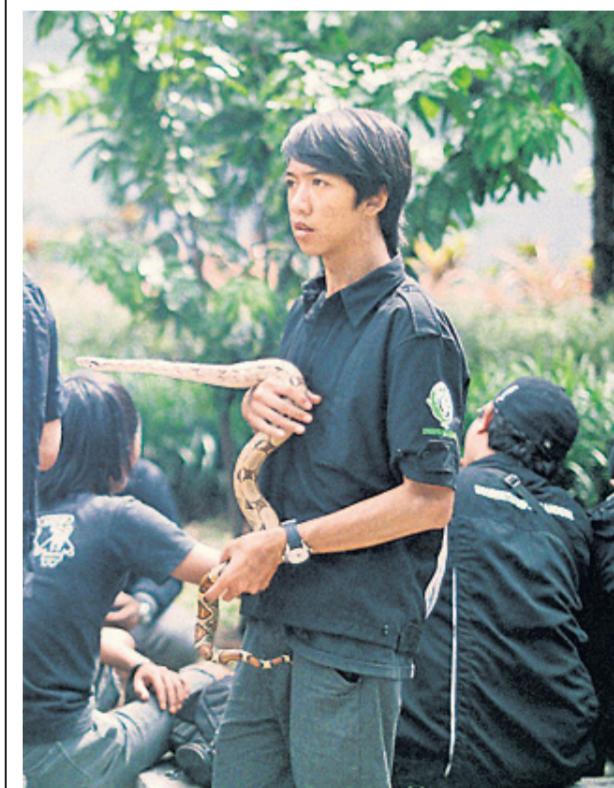
quite taken off in Bandung, the practice of whiling away the afternoon at a casual eating and drinking establishment is very much alive.

Streetside café-restaurants much like Singapore coffee shops are popular with young locals, as shown by the hordes of motorbikes normally parked out front. Neither cafés nor restaurants in the traditional sense of the word, these establishments serve local dishes such as mie ayam (noodle soup with chicken) and nasi goreng (fried rice), which one can have with Milo, Horlicks, Ovaltine or kopi (coffee).

Smoking is permitted indoors in many of these establishments, and the mid-afternoon visitor is likely to be greeted by a few curious glances from local youths in between drags of their cigarettes. In these little shops, motorbike helmets are tossed onto tables and chairs, conversation where necessary is conducted in hushed tones, and the laziness of the afternoon is magnified in the hazy air.



An elderly man peddles toy guns and slinkies.



A young man shows off his pet snake at Dago Park.

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GETTING THERE

SilAir operates daily direct flights to Bandung.

TRAVELLER'S TIPS

- Play pool, go bowling or go to a karaoke session, as such activities are popular with locals and can be enjoyed at a fraction of Singapore prices.
- Indulge in a traditional Javanese massage at a spa such as Le'mongrass Spa (Jalan Sawunggaling 4).
- Shop at one of the many malls, factory outlets and "distros" (distribution outlets for clothing and accessories by local designers).
- Take a day trip to Lembang, located at the base of a volcanic crater, where you can hike, view waterfalls and soak in hot springs.
- Try traditional Sundanese food, which is often spicy and always flavourful.