

Understand Indonesia

INDONESIA TODAY 702

The world's fourth most populous country peacefully elected a high-profile new president even as it grapples with long-time challenges.

HISTORY 705

From prehistoric cultures to the birth of a nation, Indonesia's history is as fascinating as the country itself.

CULTURE 725

Hundreds of cultures and over 700 recognised languages are just the start of Indonesia's amazingly rich culture.

FOOD & DRINK 742

Rich flavours redolent with spices are the hallmark of Indonesian meals, with regional specialities ranging from spicy surprises to fragrant favourites.

ENVIRONMENT..... 751

It's not just orangutans. Scores of species in the air, and above and below the water are found here and nowhere else.

Indonesia Today

Nothing ever seems settled in Indonesia, whether it's the land, the sea or society itself. Yet there was justifiable cause for celebration after the 2014 national elections continued the almost entirely peaceful traditions set during the previous elections five years earlier. Not bad for a country with a violent political past, including a 1965 political genocide recalled by two widely praised documentaries. Still, economic and environmental challenges remain hugely significant as the nation feels its way to the future.

Best on Film

The Act of Killing (directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012) A searing Oscar-nominated documentary about the 1965 slaughter of accused Communist sympathisers in Indonesia.

Look of Silence (directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, 2014) The follow-up to *The Act of Killing*.

Shackled (directed by Upi Avianto, 2012) A man driving in Jakarta finds a character in a rabbit suit and an abused woman in his car, with horrifying consequences.

Eat Pray Love (directed by Ryan Murphy, 2010) A flop at the box office and with critics, the film is Bali's glossiest appearance on screen.

Best in Print

A Brief History of Indonesia (2015) Indonesian expert Tim Hannigan's highly readable and entertaining narrative.

Indonesia Etc (2014) Elizabeth Pisani's brilliant travelogue and exploration of the nation.

This Earth of Mankind (1980) A canvas of Indonesia under Dutch rule by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925–2006), one of Indonesia's top writers.

Krakatoa – The Day the World Exploded (2003) Simon Winchester melds history, geology and politics, all centred on the 1883 eruption.

Jokowi

He was called the Indonesian Obama, and that exemplified the biggest hurdles that Joko Widodo faced after he won the landmark 2014 Indonesian election. The first democratically elected Indonesian president with no obvious ties to the old Suharto dictatorship or the military, Jokowi, as he's commonly known (or simply Joko), carried the dreams of every Indonesian who wants a brighter future for his or her country.

It's a huge load to carry and initially it seemed to overwhelm Jokowi. First came the wake-up call to wild expectations. Yes, he had humble roots and yes, he'd gained much praise as a reform-minded governor of Jakarta. But as the newly elected president, he gave no indication of being a radical ready to tear Indonesia away from the clutches of the powerful elite and military which have held control for decades. His vice president, Jusuf Kalla, has strong ties to the status quo (and in the landmark documentary *Act of Killing*, there's a clip of Kalla encouraging Suharto loyalists to commit violence). Jokowi took pains not to upset the establishment and in fact he showed an unexpected conservative streak.

He did nothing to stop the passage of religiously driven restrictions on the sale of alcohol and he tacitly allowed local governments in Aceh and elsewhere to become ever-more fundamentalist. And Indonesia's relationship with Australia – always prone to drama – took a dive after Jokowi didn't stop the executions of two members of the so-called Bali Nine, Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran in April, 2015. The pair had been convicted of drug offences in 2006 and had then languished in Bali's notorious Kerobokan prison during a long series of appeals and calls for clemency.

Many hoped that the perception of Jokowi as a man of the people would translate into compassion for prisoners but this was not the case. He not only rejected clemency for Chan and Sukumaran but stated that the 130 other