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# Visiting Surabaya

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## Introduction

Surabaya, the capital of East Java, is a bustling metropolis that serves as one of Indonesia's most vibrant cities. As a major port and a melting pot of cultural influences, it offers travelers a blend of heritage and modernity that is both captivating and rewarding to explore. For those contemplating a visit, Surabaya promises a unique adventure filled with intriguing history, majestic landmarks, and an array of experiences waiting to be discovered.

With its strategic location along the northern shoreline of Java Island, Surabaya historically served as a crucial trading hub. Today, the city is an essential economic center and plays a significant role in the socio-political landscape of Indonesia. Beyond its economic prowess, Surabaya is a place where traditional Javanese culture coexists with contemporary urban life, providing a lively atmosphere that can be both stimulating and inviting for visitors.

Tourists visiting Surabaya will find that the city offers myriad options for exploration and entertainment. From visiting the historical old town with its grand colonial buildings to exploring the modern shopping districts and local markets, there is something for every kind of traveler. The city is replete with parks, museums, and cultural performances, ensuring that visitors can engage with the local culture in meaningful ways.

Getting to and around Surabaya is straightforward, with Juanda International Airport connecting the city to various domestic and international destinations. Once in Surabaya, an efficient network of buses, taxis, and online ride-hailing services makes getting around the city both easy and affordable. Understanding the local transportation options is essential for tourists who wish to maximize their time while discovering all that Surabaya has to offer.

Understanding the culinary landscape is also crucial for any visitor to Surabaya. The city is famed for its delicious street food and traditional Javanese dishes, offering an appetizing entry point into Indonesia's rich culinary traditions. Whether indulging in local staples like satay or discovering hidden gems in bustling food markets, Surabaya's food scene promises to delight the taste buds and provide a deep cultural experience.

This guide aims to equip tourists with all the necessary knowledge to enjoy a memorable visit to Surabaya. From practical advice on where to stay and what to see, to insights into the local culture and etiquette, it is designed to be a comprehensive resource for anyone planning to explore this dynamic Indonesian city.

## CHAPTER ONE: Exploring Surabaya: A Cultural Perspective

Welcome to Surabaya, a city that pulses with a life force quite distinct from other major Indonesian hubs like Jakarta or Yogyakarta. Often bypassed by tourists heading straight for Bali or the cultural centres of Central Java, Surabaya offers a different, perhaps more unvarnished, glimpse into modern Indonesian urban life, heavily flavoured by its unique East Javanese character and its storied past. Approaching Surabaya purely as a checklist of sights to see would be missing the point; understanding its cultural perspective is key to truly appreciating what makes this city tick. It's a place where history isn't just confined to museums but is lived on the streets, where traditions jostle with modernity, and where the local spirit is as tangible as the tropical heat.

Surabaya proudly carries the moniker *Kota Pahlawan* - the City of Heroes. This isn't just a historical footnote referring to the pivotal role the city played in the Indonesian struggle for independence; it's an identity that permeates the local psyche. You'll sense it in the straightforwardness of the people, their resilience, and a certain passionate intensity. The *Arek Suroboyo* (people of Surabaya) are known for their egalitarian nature and a somewhat fiery, direct communication style, often perceived as less formal or hierarchical than in other parts of Java. This spirit shapes daily interactions, business dealings, and the overall social atmosphere, making Surabaya a place of candid encounters and robust energy.

The cultural fabric of Surabaya is a rich tapestry woven from various threads. While predominantly Javanese, the city has long been a melting pot, influenced significantly by Madurese migrants from the nearby island, as well as established Chinese and Arab communities who have contributed immensely to the city's commerce and cultural landscape for centuries. This blend creates a dynamic environment where different traditions coexist, sometimes merging in unique ways. Exploring Surabaya means navigating these layers, observing how Javanese values interact with the pragmatic dynamism of a major port city and the distinct customs of its diverse inhabitants.

Understanding the local dialect, *Basa Suroboyoan*, offers a fascinating window into the city's character. It's a variant of Javanese, known for being more direct, expressive, and employing unique vocabulary and intonation. While visitors aren't expected to master it, being aware of its existence and its perceived 'roughness' (often mistaken for unfriendliness by outsiders) compared to the more refined Javanese spoken in Central Java helps in interpreting interactions. The directness often masks a genuine warmth and helpfulness, characteristic of the *Arek Suroboyo*. Listening to the rhythm

and flow of conversations in cafes, markets, or on public transport provides an authentic soundtrack to the city's cultural life.

Artistic expression in Surabaya reflects both its traditional roots and its contemporary pulse. While perhaps not as renowned for classical Javanese arts as Yogyakarta or Solo, Surabaya has its own vibrant traditions. *Ludruk*, a form of folk theatre originating from East Java, combines drama, comedy, and music, often tackling social commentary with humour and directness characteristic of the region. Gamelan ensembles, though perhaps less common in public performances than elsewhere, still hold cultural significance. Increasingly, contemporary art galleries and street art are adding new layers to the city's creative landscape, reflecting the dynamism of modern Indonesian society. Exploring these artistic avenues provides insight into local narratives and aesthetics.

Religion plays a vital role in the daily lives of Surabayans. Islam is the predominant faith, and its rhythms punctuate the day, from the calls to prayer echoing from numerous mosques to the observance of religious holidays. However, Surabaya also hosts significant Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Confucian communities, each contributing to the city's diverse spiritual landscape. Mosques, churches, and temples often stand in close proximity, reflecting a long history of religious tolerance and coexistence, particularly evident in older neighbourhoods. Observing the quiet devotion and the colourful celebrations associated with different faiths offers a glimpse into the spiritual heart of the community.

Festivals and public celebrations provide vibrant snapshots of Surabaya's culture. The city's anniversary, typically celebrated in May, often involves parades, cultural performances, and community events showcasing local pride. National holidays, especially Independence Day on August 17th, are marked with great patriotic fervour, echoing the city's heroic identity. Religious festivals like Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha see widespread communal prayers and family gatherings, while Christmas and Chinese New Year are visibly celebrated by their respective communities. Witnessing these collective expressions of joy, remembrance, or devotion can be a powerful way to connect with the local culture.

Beyond traditional arts and religious observances, Surabaya has a thriving urban culture. The city boasts a burgeoning coffee shop scene, where young Surabayans gather, socialize, and work. These modern spaces often sit alongside traditional *warung kopi* (simple coffee stalls), illustrating the blend of old and new. Malls are significant social hubs, not just for shopping but for dining and entertainment. Observing how people navigate these modern urban spaces, how they interact, dress, and spend their leisure time, offers insights into contemporary Javanese urban life and aspirations. There's a palpable sense of a city on the move, embracing modernity while retaining its distinct local identity.

Engaging with Surabaya's culture requires an open mind and a willingness to observe and interact respectfully. While the directness of the *Arek Suroboyo* might initially seem abrupt to those accustomed to more indirect communication styles, it usually stems from a place of sincerity rather than rudeness. Showing genuine interest, offering a smile, and attempting a few basic Indonesian phrases (even if imperfectly) can go a long way in bridging cultural gaps. Patience and politeness are universally appreciated. Rather than judging differences, approaching them with curiosity allows for a richer, more authentic travel experience.

The historical narrative of Surabaya, particularly its role in the independence struggle, is deeply woven into the city's cultural identity. Monuments and museums dedicated to this history are plentiful, but the 'heroic' spirit is also reflected in less tangible ways - in the strong sense of community, the willingness to speak out, and a certain scrappiness. Visitors might notice this in the passionate discussions about local issues, the vibrant street life where people from all walks of life mingle, or the collective pride displayed during city-wide events. Understanding this undercurrent adds depth to the experience of exploring the city.

The influence of the Madurese community is particularly noticeable in certain districts and in aspects of the local economy, such as trade and certain types of street food. Known for their strong work ethic and distinct cultural practices, the Madurese add another layer to Surabaya's diverse population. Similarly, the historic Arab Quarter (Kampung Arab) around Ampel Mosque offers a unique cultural immersion, with its Middle Eastern architecture, specialised shops, and distinct culinary offerings. Exploring these enclaves provides a more nuanced understanding of the city's multicultural makeup beyond the dominant Javanese influence.

The Chinese Indonesian community, long established in Surabaya, has also profoundly shaped the city's character, particularly in commerce and cuisine. Historic temples like Hong Tiek Hian offer glimpses into traditional beliefs and practices, while Chinese influences are readily apparent in various local dishes and business districts. Understanding the historical contributions and the contemporary presence of this community is essential for a complete cultural picture of Surabaya. Their resilience and integration into the city fabric speak volumes about Surabaya's complex social history.

Approaching Surabaya culturally also means appreciating its relationship with the sea. As Indonesia's second-largest port, maritime activity has always been central to its identity and economy. This connection influences the city's outward-looking perspective, its diverse population drawn by trade, and even aspects of its cuisine. While the main commercial port area might not be directly accessible to tourists, visiting areas like the Kenjeran fish market or observing the activity along the Kalimas River offers a sense of this vital maritime link and its cultural implications.

The concept of *gotong royong*, mutual cooperation or community self-help, remains a significant cultural value, even in this large urban setting. While perhaps less visible than in smaller villages, this spirit often emerges during community events, neighbourhood initiatives, or times of need. It reflects a collective ethos that balances the individualistic drive often found in big cities. Tourists may not directly participate, but being aware of this underlying value helps in understanding social interactions and community dynamics.

Surabaya's educational institutions, like the renowned Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember (ITS) and Universitas Airlangga, also contribute significantly to the city's cultural vibrancy. The large student population injects youthful energy, fuels intellectual discourse, and supports a lively arts and culture scene around the campuses. This academic presence fosters innovation and ensures Surabaya remains a forward-looking city, constantly evolving while grappling with its traditions. The interaction between academia and the wider city adds another interesting cultural dimension.

Music is an integral part of everyday life, often spilling out from homes, shops, and vehicles. While traditional Gamelan and modern Indonesian pop are prevalent, Surabaya also has a lively scene for genres like *dangdut* (a popular dance music blending local, Indian, Malay, and Arabic influences), rock, and jazz. Experiencing live music, whether in a formal venue, a cafe, or even catching street performers, offers an auditory immersion into the local culture and its diverse tastes. The sheer variety reflects the city's eclectic nature.

Storytelling is a cherished aspect of the culture. Whether through the formal medium of *Ludruk* theatre, the recounting of historical events, or simply the sharing of anecdotes in casual conversation, narratives shape understanding and preserve cultural memory. Listening to stories – from guides, locals met in cafes, or even gleaned from museum exhibits – provides context and brings the city's history and culture to life in a way that mere observation cannot. It connects the present experiences with the layers of the past.

The visual landscape itself tells a cultural story. The juxtaposition of Dutch colonial architecture, sometimes beautifully restored, sometimes gracefully decaying, alongside modern skyscrapers, traditional kampung houses, and vibrant street art creates a unique urban aesthetic. Reading the city's visual cues – the styles of buildings, the layout of neighbourhoods, the colours and symbols used in public spaces – offers non-verbal insights into its history, social structure, and cultural priorities. It's a city that wears its history and its aspirations on its sleeve.

Public spaces, like the numerous city parks (*taman*), play an important social role. Families gather, friends meet, communities hold events, and individuals find moments

of respite. Observing how these spaces are used provides insights into leisure activities, social norms, and community life. Places like Taman Bungkul are more than just green areas; they are active social hubs reflecting the local lifestyle. Spending time in these parks offers a relaxed way to absorb the city's atmosphere and observe everyday cultural interactions.

While later chapters will delve into specific etiquette, a general cultural perspective involves understanding the importance of respect, particularly towards elders and in religious settings. Modesty in dress, especially when visiting places of worship or more conservative areas, is appreciated. Using the right hand for giving and receiving items is a common courtesy throughout Indonesia. While Surabayans might be more direct, basic politeness, patience, and a non-confrontational approach are always good starting points for positive interactions.

The pace of life in Surabaya can feel energetic, even relentless, especially in the central business districts and during peak traffic hours. However, there's also a capacity for enjoying relaxed moments, particularly in the evenings at food stalls or cafes. Understanding this rhythm – the interplay of hard work and communal relaxation – is part of grasping the local culture. It's not just about rushing from one attraction to another, but also about finding moments to pause and soak in the atmosphere.

The family unit remains central to the social structure. While modernization brings changes, family ties are generally strong, and respect for parents and elders is paramount. Decisions are often made collectively, and family support systems are crucial. While tourists may only get fleeting glimpses of this dynamic, understanding its importance helps contextualize social interactions and values observed in public life. This emphasis on family contributes to the strong sense of community found in many neighbourhoods.

Humour plays a significant role in social interactions. Surabayan humour can be direct, sometimes sarcastic or self-deprecating, reflecting the local character. Sharing a laugh can be a great way to connect, even across language barriers. Don't be surprised by teasing or playful banter; it's often a sign of friendly engagement rather than offense. Appreciating this aspect of communication adds another layer to understanding the *Arek Suroboyo*.

Exploring Surabaya from a cultural perspective also involves acknowledging the socio-economic diversity. The city showcases stark contrasts, with gleaming malls and luxury residences existing alongside simple kampungs and bustling traditional markets. Observing this spectrum without judgment, understanding that different ways of life coexist, is crucial. This diversity fuels the city's dynamism but also presents social challenges that are part of Surabaya's contemporary reality.

The city's relationship with food goes beyond mere sustenance; it's deeply cultural. Sharing meals is a primary form of socializing. The specific dishes popular in Surabaya (to be explored later) often have historical roots or reflect the influence of different ethnic groups. Observing how people eat, what they choose, and the social rituals surrounding food – from street food stalls to family dinners – offers profound cultural insights. The passion for local cuisine is a defining characteristic of Surabaya.

Traditional crafts, while perhaps less prominent than in dedicated craft centres like Yogyakarta, still exist. Batik cloth, particularly with coastal Javanese motifs (Batik Pesisir), can be found, sometimes showcasing designs distinct to East Java. Other crafts might include leatherwork or specific types of snacks and traditional food preparations that require skill and knowledge passed down through generations. Seeking out these crafts offers a connection to tangible cultural heritage.

The concept of face (*harga diri* or self-esteem/honour) influences social interactions, although perhaps expressed differently than in some other Asian cultures. While directness is common, causing someone public embarrassment is generally avoided. Understanding the desire to maintain social harmony, even amidst robust discussion, helps navigate interactions smoothly. It's a balance between straightforwardness and maintaining respect.

Be prepared for the sensory experience of Surabaya. It can be loud, with traffic noise, calls to prayer, and lively Kaki Lima (street vendor) chatter. It can be visually stimulating, with colourful markets, busy streets, and diverse architecture. It can be aromatic, with scents of street food, cloves from kretek cigarettes, and tropical blossoms. Engaging all your senses allows for a deeper immersion into the cultural environment. Don't shy away from the intensity; embrace it as part of the city's character.

Local pride is a palpable force. Surabayans are generally very proud of their city, its history, its food, and its unique identity. Engaging locals in conversations about what makes Surabaya special can lead to enthusiastic responses and valuable insights. Expressing genuine appreciation for aspects of their city or culture is often warmly received and can open doors to more meaningful interactions. This pride fuels the city's energy and resilience.

The city's layout itself reflects cultural priorities and historical development. Exploring different neighbourhoods – from the old colonial quarters and traditional kampungs to modern planned communities and bustling commercial centres – reveals different facets of Surabaya's social and cultural life. Each area has its own distinct atmosphere, shaped by its history, its inhabitants, and its function within the city. Pay attention to the transitions between these areas.

Environmental awareness is a growing aspect of the urban culture, with Surabaya having won awards for its efforts in city greening and waste management under previous administrations. While challenges remain, initiatives like well-maintained parks, tree-lined streets, and community recycling programs reflect an evolving cultural attitude towards the urban environment. Observing these efforts provides a glimpse into contemporary civic values and aspirations.

Consider the role of superstitions and traditional beliefs, which often coexist alongside formal religious practices. Beliefs in spirits, auspicious dates, or traditional healing methods might subtly influence daily life for some residents. While not always openly discussed, acknowledging the possibility of these underlying beliefs adds another layer to understanding local perspectives and behaviours. These often blend Javanese mysticism with religious doctrines.

Ultimately, exploring Surabaya from a cultural perspective is about looking beyond the surface. It's about understanding the historical context that shapes the present, appreciating the diversity of its people, listening to their stories, observing their interactions, and engaging with their traditions and contemporary expressions. It requires curiosity, respect, and a willingness to step outside one's own cultural comfort zone.

Think of Surabaya not just as a place to visit, but as a complex cultural ecosystem. Your experience will be greatly enriched by trying to understand the forces that drive it - the heroic spirit forged in history, the dynamic interplay of diverse communities, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the sheer resilience and energy of its people. Approach it with open eyes and an open heart.

The straightforward nature of the *Arek Suroboyo* can be incredibly refreshing once you understand it. There's often less pretense and a greater willingness to engage directly compared to more hierarchical societies. This can lead to surprisingly candid conversations and genuine connections, offering a more immediate and unfiltered cultural experience for the observant visitor.

Don't expect a perfectly polished tourist experience everywhere you go. Surabaya is a working city, a major hub of commerce and industry. Part of its cultural authenticity lies in its grittiness, its imperfections, and its focus on the business of everyday life. Appreciating this reality, rather than comparing it to manicured tourist destinations, is key to understanding its character.

The rhythm of the day is often dictated by work, prayer times, and the heat. Mornings and late afternoons/evenings are typically the busiest times for markets and outdoor activities. Midday might see a lull as people seek respite from the heat. Aligning your exploration with this natural rhythm can enhance your experience and provide better opportunities for observation and interaction.

Finally, remember that culture is not static. Surabaya is constantly evolving, influenced by national trends, global connectivity, and internal dynamics. What you experience is a snapshot in time. The city's culture is a living, breathing entity shaped by its past, navigating the present, and looking towards the future. Your visit is an opportunity to witness and, in a small way, interact with this ongoing process. By approaching Surabaya with this cultural perspective, you move beyond being a mere tourist to becoming a thoughtful observer, ready to appreciate the unique spirit of the City of Heroes.

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