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Visiting Bandung

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Introduction

Nestled amid the lush highlands of West Java, Indonesia, Bandung offers an exquisite blend of natural beauty, vibrant culture, and rich history. Known affectionately as the "Paris van Java" for its European ambiance and colonial architecture, Bandung is a city that promises a distinctive travel experience filled with delightful surprises.

Bandung's strategic location makes it a perfect destination for those seeking a balance of urban excitement and tranquil retreats. Encircled by tea plantations, volcanic peaks, and natural wonders, the city is a gateway to awe-inspiring landscapes that are a feast for the eyes. Whether it's the enchanting view from the iconic Tangkuban Perahu volcano or the serene beauty of Kawah Putih crater lake, nature lovers will find plenty to appreciate.

But Bandung is not just about its breathtaking scenery; it is also a cultural melting pot. The city's rich history is evident in its architecture—from the stately Gedung Sate to the art deco marvels scattered throughout the city. Visitors can immerse themselves in the vibrant traditions of the Sundanese people and experience the harmonious blend of old and new that characterizes life in Bandung.

For food enthusiasts, Bandung is a culinary haven where traditional Sundanese dishes meet contemporary Indonesian gastronomy. The bustling food stalls, quaint cafes, and upscale eateries offer a taste of Bandung's diverse and delectable flavors, making every meal an unforgettable adventure.

Shopping is another enticing aspect of Bandung, with its famed factory outlets, trendy boutiques, and bustling markets. Visitors can indulge in retail therapy, picking up fashion-forward items and unique local souvenirs that capture the spirit of the city.

In this comprehensive guide, we delve into the heart of Bandung, unraveling the secrets and highlights of this charming city. From travel tips and accommodation options to detailed itineraries and cultural insights, this book serves as your ultimate companion, ensuring that your visit to Bandung is as enchanting as the city itself. Whether you are a first-time visitor or a seasoned traveler, "Visiting Bandung: A Guide for Tourists" promises to be an essential resource for planning the perfect getaway.

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction to Bandung

Welcome to Bandung, the vibrant heart of West Java. Before you dive into its bustling streets, lush landscapes, and tantalizing culinary scene, let's take a moment to understand the city itself. Knowing its place in the world, the story of its past, the rhythm of its culture, and the origins of its charming nickname will undoubtedly enrich your visit, providing context to the sights you see and the experiences you have. This chapter peels back the layers, introducing you to the fundamental character of Bandung.

Geographically, Bandung occupies a rather privileged position. It sits nestled within a basin, cradled by volcanic mountains, at an average elevation of about 768 meters (2,520 feet) above sea level. This Highland setting, part of the larger Parahyangan region (meaning "Abode of the Gods" in Sundanese), blesses the city with a cooler, more temperate climate than most other major Indonesian cities, particularly the sprawling coastal capital, Jakarta, which lies roughly 140 kilometers (about 87 miles) to the northwest. This natural air conditioning has historically been one of Bandung's major draws, offering respite from tropical heat.

The surrounding landscape is dramatic and fertile, dominated by dormant and active volcanoes like Tangkuban Perahu to the north and Patuha (home to Kawah Putih) to the south. These volcanic highlands are not just scenic backdrops; they are integral to the region's identity and economy, supporting vast tea plantations, farms, and geothermal activity. The city itself sprawls across the basin floor, intersected by several rivers, most notably the Cikapundung River, which has played a significant role in its historical development. As the capital of West Java province, Bandung is a major administrative, economic, and educational hub for the region.

The history of Bandung stretches back further than its colonial-era moniker might suggest, though its transformation into a significant urban center is relatively recent compared to ancient Javanese cities. Archaeological evidence points to prehistoric human activity in the Bandung basin, including findings related to the "Bandung Man," an early hominin specimen. However, for centuries, the area remained sparsely populated, comprising small Sundanese villages scattered amidst the highlands. These early communities lived in relative isolation, sustained by agriculture and closely connected to the natural environment.

The story of modern Bandung truly begins with the construction of the Great Post Road (De Grote Postweg) between 1808 and 1811, commissioned by Herman Willem Daendels, the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies under Napoleonic French rule. This ambitious infrastructure project aimed to improve military defense and

communication across Java. Legend holds that Daendels, upon seeing the strategically advantageous and scenic location during the road's construction, ordered the administrative center of the region (then at Krapyak, south of present-day Bandung) to be moved. He is famously said to have struck the ground with his staff at a point near the Cikapundung River, declaring, "Zorg, dat als ik terugkom hier een stad is gebouwd!" ("Make sure that when I return, a city has been built here!").

Whether the legend is entirely accurate or not, the opening of the Great Post Road proved critical. It drastically reduced travel time across West Java and connected the Bandung area to major centers like Batavia (Jakarta) and Cirebon. This newfound accessibility spurred growth. Regent R. A. Wiranatakusumah II is credited with formally establishing the city around 1810, moving the regency's capital to the site selected by Daendels, near the western bank of the Cikapundung. Initially, it was a modest settlement, but the foundations for future expansion were laid.

The 19th century saw Bandung gradually evolve, particularly with the burgeoning plantation economy in the surrounding Parahyangan highlands. The Dutch colonial administration recognized the region's suitability for cultivating cash crops like coffee, tea, and later, cinchona (the source of quinine, crucial for combating malaria). Wealth generated from these plantations flowed into Bandung, transforming it from a quiet administrative post into a prosperous center. European planters and administrators began settling in the area, attracted by the pleasant climate and economic opportunities.

This influx of European residents and capital profoundly shaped Bandung's physical and social landscape. The city began to adopt a more European character. Infrastructure improved, with the arrival of the railway in 1884 further enhancing connectivity and cementing Bandung's role as a hub for the plantation economy. Goods could now be transported efficiently to the port of Batavia for export. This period saw the construction of numerous villas, government buildings, shops, and hotels, often reflecting prevailing European architectural styles.

By the early 20th century, Bandung's reputation was soaring. Its cool climate, scenic surroundings, growing amenities, and sophisticated atmosphere led the Dutch colonial government to seriously consider moving the capital of the Dutch East Indies from Batavia to Bandung. Batavia was perceived as hot, humid, and prone to disease, whereas Bandung offered a healthier and more comfortable environment. Plans were drawn up, and significant construction commenced, designed to accommodate the central government. Gedung Sate, arguably Bandung's most iconic landmark, was built during this period (1920-1924) as part of this grand vision, intended to house governmental departments.

While the full relocation of the capital never fully materialized due to economic constraints (the Great Depression) and ultimately the outbreak of World War II and

Indonesian independence, the planning and investment during this era left an indelible mark on the city. It resulted in a concentration of impressive colonial architecture, particularly in the Art Deco style, which flourished globally in the 1920s and 1930s. This architectural legacy contributed significantly to Bandung earning its famous nickname, "Paris van Java."

The nickname wasn't solely about buildings, however. It reflected a broader perception of Bandung as a cosmopolitan, fashionable, and leisurely city, at least for the colonial elite and wealthy Indonesians. It boasted chic boutiques, European-style cafes, grand hotels, and a social scene that mimicked European capitals. Wealthy planters would descend from their highland estates to socialize, shop, and enjoy the city's amenities. Bandung became synonymous with style, relaxation, and a certain European sophistication transplanted into a tropical highland setting. It was a place where one could escape the heat and bustle of the lowlands and indulge in a lifestyle perceived as cultured and modern.

The Japanese occupation during World War II brought hardship and ended the Dutch colonial era abruptly. Following the war and Indonesia's declaration of independence in 1945, Bandung played a role in the ensuing struggle against returning Dutch forces. The "Bandung Lautan Api" (Bandung Sea of Fire) incident in March 1946 is a significant event in the city's revolutionary history, where retreating Indonesian fighters deliberately burned parts of the southern city to prevent the Dutch from re-establishing a base there.

Perhaps Bandung's most significant moment on the international stage came in April 1955, when it hosted the Asia-Africa Conference. This landmark event brought together leaders from 29 newly independent Asian and African nations, representing more than half the world's population at the time. Figures like Sukarno (Indonesia), Jawaharlal Nehru (India), Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt), and Zhou Enlai (China) convened at Gedung Merdeka (Independence Building) to discuss mutual cooperation, oppose colonialism and neocolonialism, and promote world peace. The conference was a seminal moment in the Non-Aligned Movement and significantly raised Bandung's global profile, cementing its place in post-colonial history.

Since independence, Bandung has continued to grow rapidly. It solidified its position as the capital of West Java and became a major center for higher education, fostering a reputation for innovation and creativity. Institutions like the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) are among Indonesia's most prestigious, attracting students from across the archipelago and contributing to the city's youthful and dynamic atmosphere. This academic environment has nurtured talent in various fields, including engineering, design, and the arts.

The city's population swelled, leading to urban expansion and the challenges that come with it, such as traffic congestion and infrastructure strain. However, Bandung

has also embraced its creative potential, becoming known for its vibrant music scene, independent fashion designers, thriving digital startups, and a plethora of unique cafes and eateries. It maintains a distinct identity, often seen as more relaxed and artistically inclined compared to the relentless pace of Jakarta.

Understanding Bandung's history helps contextualize its present. The colonial architecture speaks of a specific era of development and ambition. The memory of the Asia-Africa Conference imbues certain sites with historical weight. The city's growth reflects broader trends in Indonesian urbanization, while its connection to the surrounding highlands remains a defining feature.

Central to the experience of Bandung is encountering Sundanese culture. While Indonesia is incredibly diverse, West Java is the heartland of the Sundanese people, the second-largest ethnic group in the country after the Javanese. Bandung, as the provincial capital, is a focal point for Sundanese identity and cultural expression, although like any major city, it's also home to people from across Indonesia.

The Sundanese language is widely spoken alongside Bahasa Indonesia (the national language). While you can certainly get by with Bahasa Indonesia or even English in tourist areas, hearing Sundanese spoken around you is part of the local fabric. Knowing a few basic Sundanese pleasantries, like "Wilujeng enjing" (Good morning) or "Hatur nuhun" (Thank you), can be a nice gesture, showing respect for the local culture, though Bahasa Indonesia equivalents like "Selamat pagi" and "Terima kasih" are universally understood.

Sundanese culture places a high value on politeness (sopan santun), respect for elders, and maintaining harmony within the community. Interactions often emphasize indirectness and sensitivity to others' feelings. There's a general sense of refinement and grace associated with traditional Sundanese arts and social etiquette. This doesn't mean Bandung is a stuffy place; it's lively and friendly, but an underlying cultural preference for courtesy prevails.

Traditional Sundanese arts are very much alive in and around Bandung. Music is particularly prominent, with the Angklung being perhaps the most famous Sundanese instrument. This unique bamboo instrument, played collectively, creates enchanting melodies. Saung Angklung Udjo, a cultural center on the outskirts of Bandung, is dedicated to preserving and promoting Angklung music and offers popular performances (covered in more detail later). Another important musical form is Gamelan Degung, a Sundanese variant of the traditional gamelan orchestra, known for its distinctive melodic scales and often softer, more melancholic sound compared to Central Javanese gamelan.

Dance is another vital aspect. Jaipongan is a relatively modern (developed in the 1960s) but hugely popular traditional dance form known for its dynamic movements,

complex rhythms, and interplay between dancers and musicians. It draws inspiration from older folk traditions and martial arts. You might encounter Jaipongan performances at cultural events or specific venues.

Wayang Golek, the Sundanese tradition of wooden rod puppetry, is a captivating art form used to tell epic stories, often adapted from the Hindu epics Mahabharata and Ramayana, but also incorporating local legends and contemporary social commentary. The intricately carved and painted puppets, manipulated by a master puppeteer (dalang) who also voices all the characters and directs the accompanying gamelan, bring these tales to life. While performances might be less frequent than in the past, Wayang Golek remains a significant cultural touchstone.

Beyond performance arts, Sundanese culture manifests in crafts like batik (though Javanese batik is more famous, West Java has its own motifs), intricate wood carving, and traditional weaving. The appreciation for nature, deeply rooted in the mountainous Parahyangan homeland, also permeates the culture, reflected in folklore, artistic motifs, and a general reverence for the landscape.

Food, of course, is a massive part of any culture, and Sundanese cuisine has its own distinct characteristics, which we'll explore in detail in a dedicated chapter. Generally, it's known for its freshness, emphasis on raw vegetables (lalapan), flavorful chili pastes (sambal), and preparations like grilling or steaming, often featuring freshwater fish. Experiencing local food is an essential way to connect with Sundanese culture in Bandung.

The city's cultural landscape is not static; it's a blend of the traditional and the contemporary. Bandung is renowned for its creative industries. It's a hub for fashion designers, artists, musicians, and digital innovators. This creative energy is palpable in the city's atmosphere, evident in its numerous independent boutiques (distros), art galleries, live music venues, and uniquely themed cafes. There's a youthful vibrancy driven by the large student population and a willingness to experiment and blend local traditions with global trends.

Religion plays a significant role in daily life, with the vast majority of the population adhering to Islam. Mosques are prominent features of the urban landscape, and the call to prayer punctuates the day. However, Bandung is generally considered a tolerant city, and the practice of Islam often incorporates local Sundanese cultural values and traditions. You'll find a society that is religiously observant yet welcoming to visitors.

Returning to the nickname, "Paris van Java" (Parijs van Java in Dutch), it's worth pondering its relevance today. Coined in the pre-World War II colonial era, it captured a specific moment when Bandung was being shaped by European tastes and aspirations. The wide, tree-lined boulevards, the prevalence of Art Deco architecture,

the fashionable shops, luxury hotels, and the cool climate all contributed to this comparison with the French capital, albeit on a vastly smaller scale. It represented an idealized vision of European sophistication in the tropics, a haven for the colonial elite.

Does Bandung still feel like the Paris of Java? In some ways, the legacy persists. The impressive collection of Art Deco buildings remains a defining feature, particularly around areas like Braga Street and the city center. The cool climate is still a significant draw. The city retains a reputation for fashion, albeit now driven more by local designers and factory outlets than haute couture boutiques of the colonial era. The café culture is stronger than ever, though the establishments are now diverse, modern, and cater to a broad Indonesian clientele rather than exclusively European tastes.

However, modern Bandung is a vastly different city from the one that earned the nickname. It's a large, bustling Indonesian metropolis grappling with 21st-century urban challenges. Traffic can be intense, particularly on weekends when visitors flock from Jakarta. Sprawling development has altered parts of the landscape. While the historical core retains its charm, much of the city reflects contemporary Indonesian urban life.

So, while "Paris van Java" remains a popular and evocative nickname, it's best understood as a historical reference point rather than a literal description of present-day Bandung. It speaks to a specific period in the city's past and highlights certain enduring characteristics – the climate, the architectural heritage, a flair for fashion, and a generally pleasant atmosphere. Perhaps a more accurate contemporary description might emphasize its status as a creative, culinary, and educational hub nestled in scenic highlands. Yet, the romance of "Paris van Java" endures, adding a layer of historical intrigue to the visitor's experience. It invites you to seek out those remnants of the past – a stroll down Braga Street, admiring an Art Deco facade, enjoying coffee in a heritage building – and imagine the city as it once was, while appreciating the dynamic Indonesian city it is today.

In essence, Bandung is a city of captivating contrasts. It's where misty volcanic peaks meet vibrant urban energy, where colonial history intertwines with Sundanese traditions, and where artistic creativity flourishes alongside academic pursuits. Its location provides natural beauty and a pleasant climate, its history offers layers of stories from regent times through colonial ambitions to post-independence milestones, and its living Sundanese culture provides a rich tapestry of arts, values, and flavors. Understanding these foundational elements – the lay of the land, the echoes of the past, the pulse of the local culture, and the story behind its famous nickname – sets the stage for a deeper appreciation of all that Bandung has to offer the curious traveler.

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