



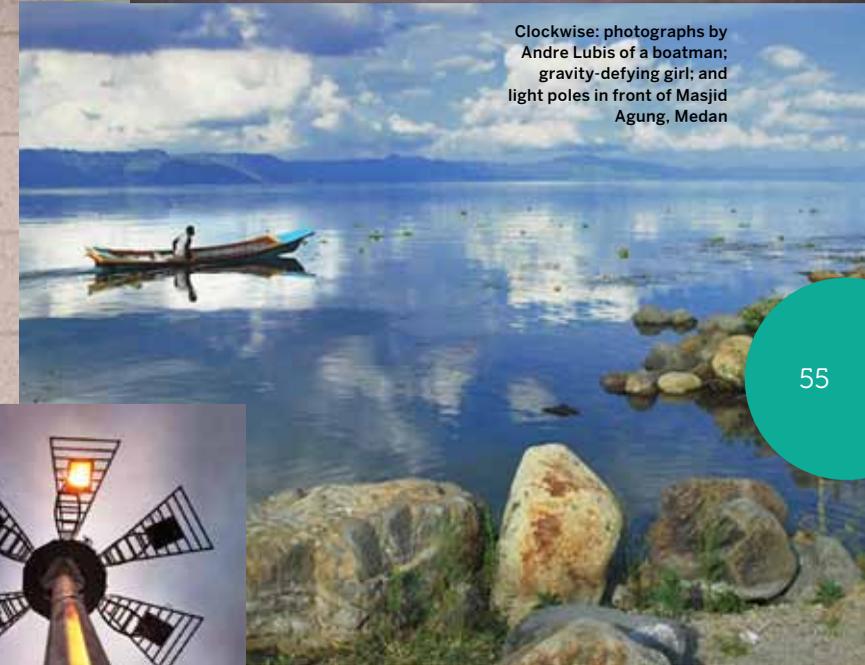
Mesjid Raya Mosque



Artist Sayang Bangun's depiction of a procession of Karonese women



Beatbox and rap artist Adi Suranta Ketaren

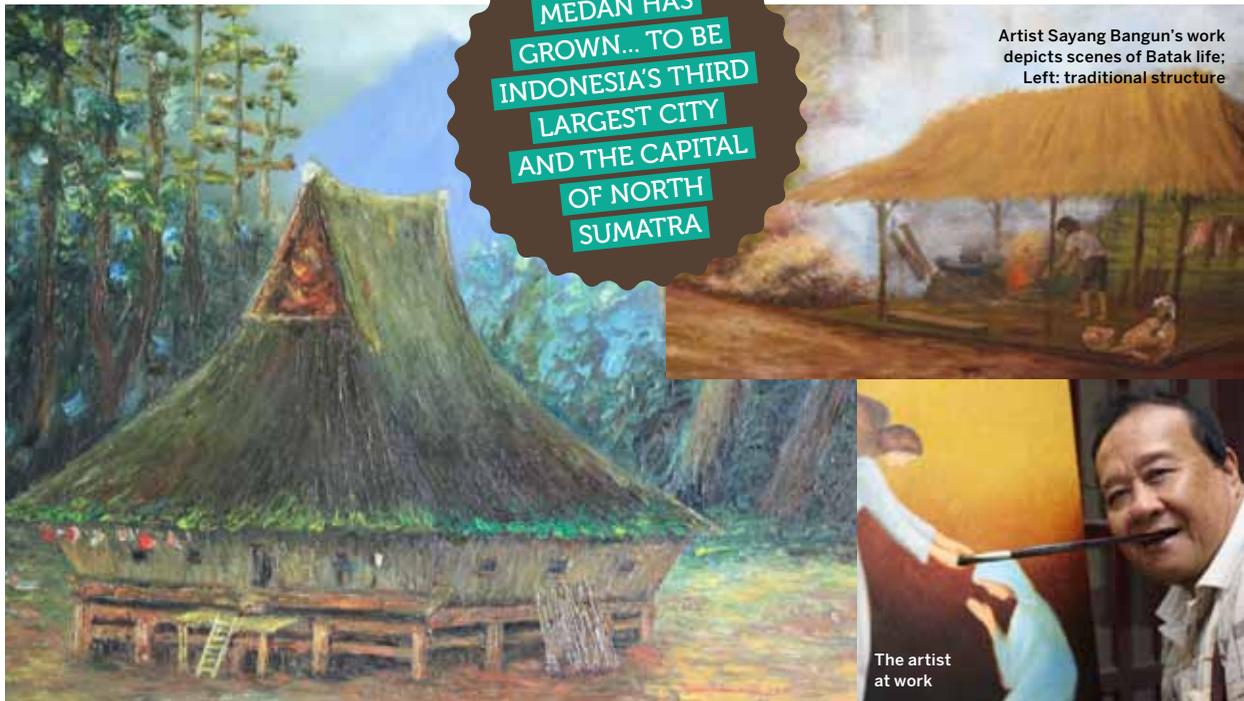


Clockwise: photographs by Andre Lubis of a boatman; gravity-defying girl; and light poles in front of Masjid Agung, Medan



Pagi di Danau Toba by Johnny Siahaan





**MEDAN HAS GROWN... TO BE INDONESIA'S THIRD LARGEST CITY AND THE CAPITAL OF NORTH SUMATRA**

Artist Sayang Bangun's work depicts scenes of Batak life: Left: traditional structure

The artist at work

It's the first thing you see when you enter the room: a family of white, fan-tailed doves perched on the roots and branches of a tree. The painting – so large and vivid that it would do Diego Rivera proud – hangs above a tapestry sofa and glossy houseplants. It captivates me in a way that paintings don't often do. I can feel the optimism and hope in each brushstroke. When my friend Fernando Bangun invited me to stop by and meet his father to talk about his paintings, I didn't expect them to be this good.

"This is my dad," Fernando says as a small man with a big smile emerges from the kitchen. He's waving his arms and suddenly I'm shy and unsure what to do. Normally I would shake his hand, then touch my own to my heart in the Indonesian style of greeting. But Fernando's father has no hands; his arms end just above the elbow. "It's okay, go ahead," Fernando says, so I reach out to greet his father and my trepidation melts in the enthusiasm of his welcome.

In English, Sayang Bangun's given name means "love" and his surname means "awaken," a fitting description of this Medan-born artist who overcame such long odds of success on the strength of his love of life and sheer determination. Sayang's parents, unable to cope with a child born

## WHERE TO STAY

**\* HIGH-END**  
Stay at the centrally located (and recently renovated) Grand Aston City Hall Hotel. Sink into a velvet sofa, cocktail in hand, and enjoy live jazz on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays at the Demitasse Lobby Lounge. On the other side of the lobby, Entrance Music Temple hosts Indonesia's top DJs. 1 Jln Balaikota Medan, tel: +62 (0)61 455 7000, [www.aston-international.com](http://www.aston-international.com)

**\* MID-RANGE**  
**Conveniently located near the airport, the Danau Toba Hotel is a mini-resort, with a pool and two nightlife venues. At the Tavern, live bands play Indonesian and Batak party classics. 17 Jln Imam Bonjol, tel: +62 (0)61 415 7000, [www.danautoba.com](http://www.danautoba.com)**

**\* BUDGET**  
Blue Angel is a comfortable, clean hostel in the backpacker area close to the historic Mesjid Raya Mosque (built in 1906 in the Moroccan style). It's just around the corner from Café Raya, a popular hangout with good food, cold beer and nightly guitar singalongs. 70 Jln Sisingamangaraja, tel: +62 (0)61 732 0702

with no hands and underdeveloped legs, abandoned him in a field near his home village of Batu Sanggehen in the North Sumatran highlands. A local Catholic priest, Father Fernando, found him and took him in. Later, after the priest saw how well the child painted by holding the brush in his mouth, he took the 18-year-old Sayang to Italy, where he was able to study art.

A lifelong Catholic, Sayang is now a member of the international Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists and makes his living painting greeting cards. He's also something of an inspiration for up-and-coming artists in his hometown. In the past two centuries, Kampung Medan has grown from a sleepy tobacco plantation town into Indonesia's third largest city and the capital of North Sumatra. With a population of three million, Medan is modernising fast and leaders like Sayang fill a vital role by helping preserve time-honoured cultural traditions.

Sayang is Karonese, a member of the Batak people of North Sumatra and neighbouring Aceh. His paintings – modernist works with an Italian flavour – display the warmth of Sayang's love for his culture: the greens and golds of the rice fields where he was both abandoned and discovered; a Karonese house on stilts with a thatched roof that was created using feathered brushstrokes; and my

Adi strikes a pose



ADI EFFORTLESSLY COMBINES ARTISTIC PASSION AND MODERN TASTES WITH A DEEP AND ABIDING FAITH

favourite, a procession of Karonese women in traditional garb carrying fruit baskets on their heads. "I've travelled all over the world," Sayang says, "but I always come home to Medan. My dream is to open a gallery here. There are so many talented young artists here, so much potential. Especially children who have a disability like me. I want to make a school so they can develop their skills and become independent."

Beatboxer and rap artist Adi Suranta Ketaren is another Medan native with big dreams. The 21-year-old rapper and music producer owns 165, a studio where he mixes beats and hangs out with members of Gendang Mulut, the beatboxing community he founded in 2010.

When I arrange to meet Adi at a local coffee shop, he asks, "Is it okay if I'm a little late? It's *magrib*." He arrives after sundown prayers in baggy jeans and a black T-shirt that reads "I love hip hop more than I love my girlfriend." Like Sayang, Adi effortlessly combines artistic passion and modern tastes with a deep and abiding faith. In May, he opened for Washington, DC rappers Native Deen – known for their positive brand of Islamic hip hop – when the group played a gig at Muhammadiyah University of North Sumatra. Adi has also been active in Aceh's thriving hip-hop community, producing beats for local group HNS.

With the help of Facebook, YouTube and music portal ReverbNation, Adi and other Medan acts like reggae band The Coconut Heads and jazz artist Erukakra Mahameru have succeeded in reaching wider audiences.

Adi's Medan Beatbox Community is steadily growing, with about 30 beatboxers (vocal percussionists who use their mouths to produce drum beats and musical sounds) meeting weekly to practice. After some impressive vocal gymnastics that take me back to the days of '80s "Human Beat Box" Doug E Fresh, Adi recounts how beatboxing helped him win a place in an international youth cultural exchange programme in Canada, an experience that changed his life.

"Hip hop has opened doors for me," he says. "It was because I could beatbox that I went to Canada. I didn't know much English before then. Now, when I wake up in the



Students at the University of Medan

## WHAT TO DO

\* Hop on a motor *becak* (motorised rickshaw taxi) to Jalan Dr Mansyur near the University of North Sumatra to explore its bustling student scene, local clothing boutiques and inexpensive cafés like Penang Corner, a favourite venue for photographer meetups. 88 Jln SMTK, across from Steak N Stuff

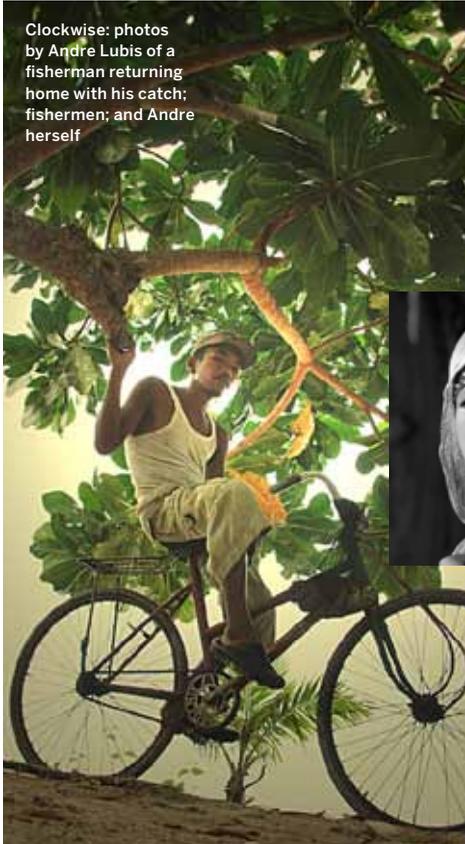
\* Hang out at Cambridge, one of Medan's newest shopping malls, and take in the latest art and photography exhibits. G/F, 217 Jln S Parman, Grand Swiss-Belhotel

\* Take a photography tour of Kesawan Square's beautiful buildings from the Dutch colonial era, then stop for a bite at Tip Top Restaurant, a local institution. Sample the restaurant's speciality desserts while being serenaded by Batak singers under whirling ceiling fans. 92 Jln Ahmad Yani, www.tiptopmedan.com

Medan boasts a thriving live music scene



Clockwise: photos by Andre Lubis of a fisherman returning home with his catch; fishermen; and Andre herself



Berastagi, Tanah Karo

Johnny Siahaan, chairman of the Toba Photographer Club

AFTER AMERICANS, INDONESIANS ARE THE WORLD'S LEADING USERS OF FACEBOOK

morning, hip hop gives me spirit. I hope hip hop can make me a life."

Adi's dream is to be the first Indonesian hip-hop producer to go international. As a first step, he plans to head to the US to study sound engineering. His ultimate aim is to start a performing arts school for underprivileged children in Medan.

Tight-knit communities of people who help each other are the engines that drive this city. Events tend to be organised quickly through social media – after Americans, Indonesians are the world's leading users of Facebook and are among the most enthusiastic fans of Twitter and smartphones. With technology at their fingertips, people are connecting in record numbers, creating groups around common interests and sharing their work.

By far the largest group of cultural enthusiasts in Medan is made up of photographers. When I drop in on a meetup at an open-air restaurant, it's standing-room only. Shutterbugs have come in droves to learn from pros like Johnny Siahaan, chairman of the Toba Photographer Club, who's known for his portraits of traditional

## ON THE WEB

- ASSOCIATION OF MOUTH AND FOOT PAINTING ARTISTS, [www.vdmfk.com](http://www.vdmfk.com)
- REVERBNATION, [www.reverbnation.com](http://www.reverbnation.com)
- TOBA PHOTOGRAPHER CLUB, [www.tobaphotographerclub.com](http://www.tobaphotographerclub.com)
- MEDAN PHOTOGRAPHER CLUB, [www.medanphotography.blogspot.com](http://www.medanphotography.blogspot.com)
- APLAUS, a Medan-based youth culture magazine, [www.aplaus.com](http://www.aplaus.com)
- MEDANKU, for upcoming events and an overview of Medan, [www.medanku.com](http://www.medanku.com)

Batak life at nearby Lake Toba, the world's largest volcanic crater lake.

Andre Lubis, a professional wedding photographer, plops down beside me to chat. "In the past three years, photography has begun to really boom here," she says, pointing out the profusion of new club members, many of them women. The stills on Andre's Blackberry reveal her passion – macro (close-up) photography of everyday objects. "I'm also a writer," she says. "Five years ago in Indonesia we might not have said that, but it's okay to be a writer now."

Indonesia is now in its second decade as a democracy and Medan continues to provide Sumatra's creative spirits with room to develop. With strong roots in their culture and community, artists like Sayang, Adi, Johnny and Andre offer inspiration as they reach out to the rest of the world and help Medan grow on its own terms.

**t** Tiger Airways has multiple flights weekly to Medan from Singapore and Jakarta. Book your flights at [www.tigerairways.com](http://www.tigerairways.com)