



*The long-tailed macaque (top), a hardy, adaptable species, found across most of the Indonesian archipelago, stares out across his threatened forest, as a saltwater crocodile (above) swims through one of Lombok's many thriving swamps.*

# Lombok

## The Edge of the Orient

Text and photographs by Indraneil Das

At Bali's Ngurah Rai Airport, a petite Indonesian woman ushered me into the ageing Merpati (literally, "dove") Airlines aircraft. Much to my surprise and delight, the very same lady later took charge of the controls and flew the craft over the short stretch of sea separating Bali from the island of Lombok! Peering out of the window I saw the extensively cultivated land of Bali and its cloud-swirling Mount Agung, and then the deep straits, which my guide book quite accurately described as "seething with whirlpools".

At Mataram, the dusty, rustic, provincial capital of Lombok, my colleague Samhan Nyawa (from the University of Brunei Darussalam) and I stepped off the plane and must have looked for all practical purposes like typical day-tourists (haircut/massage/buy-half-a-dozen "Lombok Primitive Design" tee-shirts and leave for home!). Samhan, a Dusun from northern Borneo, and I were however there to survey the wildlife, especially the amphibian and reptile fauna of the area around the base of Mount Rintjani, which towers 3,726 metres above sea level, making it one of the highest mountains in Indonesia.

The fauna of Lombok had drawn the attention of Alfred Russell Wallace, Darwin's collaborator on the theory of biological evolution. Wallace found a sharp divide between the fauna of southeast Asia and that of Australia, and drew a line between Bali and



Lombok (now called "Wallace's Line"), hypothesizing this as a boundary between the two faunal units. Subsequent workers have, however, found that the situation was not quite so simple. In fact, the eastern Indonesian archipelago, called Nusa Tenggara (or the Lesser Sunda Islands), extending from Lombok, up to Timor, and including Sulawesi (formerly called Celebes), *Maluku* (*Moluccas*) Seram, Komodo and Flores, have species with affinities to both the south-east Asian and Australian fauna. This transitional zone is now referred to as "Wallacea", a tribute befitting this great man.

An archipelago comprising 13,667 islands, Indonesia has more tropical forests

than any other country in the world, barring Brazil. The natural vegetation of Lombok once comprised evergreen rainforests which sadly now survive only in isolated patches in steep valleys on the south-facing mountain slopes. Savannah woodlands, with *casuarina* and *eucalyptus*, are now more typical of the non-cultivated land. Like Bali, the industrious people of Lombok — the Muslim Sasaks, as well as the Hindu settlers, have toiled hard to convert most of the island into lush fields of rice paddy.

Our chartered van skirted the north coast of Lombok, and eventually dumped us in the Sasak village of Senaru just as dusk was falling. "We climb up to Segara Anak, below the rim tomorrow, yes?" asked Amin, our guide, pointing beyond the clouds. For the