

## **Vila Botani by Antony Sutton (March 2011)**

Ever since people have lived in Jakarta they have sought respite from the oppressive heat in the mountains to the south. The colonial Dutch and British would frequently retire to the cooler climes of Bogor a hundred years ago while today the traffic heading to Puncak every weekend and holiday is the stuff of legend.

The mountains of the Puncak and Bogor with its world class Botanical Gardens are still magnets to city dwellers looking to try out the new pullover they treated themselves to but the increased traffic congestion, with little respite in sight for the hapless day tripping motorist, means that people are looking for a more stress free getaway that can provide the fresh mountain air they are seeking but without the noxious fumes of a thousand others with the same idea.

Nestled on the lower slopes of the Gunung Salak, Vila Botani, with an accompanying botanic farm, aims to meet that demand. Boasting a handful of rustic bungalows tumbling down the contours of the mountain, Vila Botani evokes memories of an old Puncak with crisp, fresh early mornings, chilly evenings and mountain views to die for.

The pace is slow in mountains around the world and 750 metres up Gunung Salak, things are no different. Days begin with a spectacular sunrise, flashes of pink stretch across the horizon while Gunung Pangrango looms moody and misty above the valley and down below the lights in Bogor flicker then fade signaling the dawn of a new day.

Indonesia's mountain tourism is poorly developed despite the nature of the islands. Switzerland, for example, can enchant visitors with breathtaking scenery, billiard table smooth lakes and cheery locals blowing 'alpenhoorn' on demand. Gunung Salak has none of them and many of the locals are too busy working the land to worry about the handful of tourists who pass through.

For people used to the crass commercialism on the Puncak this will come as a welcome relief. Instead of being hassled by vendors selling everything from plastic

bottled water to tacky brass furnishings from ships, the solitude of the Salak is reason enough to visit. As you walk the narrow trails that go through the nearby pine forest and national park locals you come across will be too busy with their own affairs to worry about selling trash to foreign visitors. Woodsmen doubled up under their bundle of freshly collected firewood are happy to greet people with a selamat pagi but they are soon on their way, their bare feet comfortable in the muddy ditches or the rocky bridleways.

That's one of the beauties of the Vila Botani. There isn't a whole lot to do and while you're doing nothing you're left alone with your thoughts and the views.

For the active there are plenty of hiking trails heading up the slopes, crossing narrow streams. The gentleman behind the complex, American Alex Korn, has been hiking and trekking the mountains around Bogor for the best part of a quarter of a century and he is a fount of knowledge on where to go and what to see (check out his website [www.puncaktrek.com](http://www.puncaktrek.com)).

Of course being on a mountain so close to Bogor, rain is an ever present threat and it pays to be fully equipped when setting out. Good hiking boots are essential as is a waterproof jacket and a water bottle. And for people unused to the rigors of trekking, no matter how gentle the slopes, it pays to have the services of a guide accompany. Not only can they help in case of difficulty, they are invaluable in tracking what remaining wildlife remains.