Four places in Indonesia to visit before everyone else does.

Yes, the rumor is true: Garuda is giving eligible international travelers a free domestic flight to places most visitors skip. Here is where I would use it.

5 min read · Last refreshed 27 October 2026

> **The free flight offer ends 30 November 2026.** Your flight to Indonesia must leave by then. How to get yours







Ah, the infamous Uluwatu cave shot. It may be the most Instagrammed spot in Bali, but there is much more Indonesia to discover. Read on.

Why Indonesia is paying for your next flight.

Indonesia wants you off the Bali to Jakarta loop, and it is paying for it. Garuda's new Stopover Program, run with the Ministry of Tourism and Mastercard, adds a free domestic connecting flight to

participating destinations. Lake Toba, Borobudur, Mandalika (Lombok) and Labuan Bajo are the four it is built around.

The reason is simple math. In 2025 Bali had 6.9 million foreign visits and Jakarta 2.8 million, according to Statistics Indonesia (ANTARA). Everywhere else got crumbs. When a government subsidizes a ticket, it is telling you where it wants the roads, hotels and money to go next.

How to get your free flight, step by step

1. **Buy a round-trip international ticket on Garuda.** Garuda must fly it to Indonesia itself. Codeshare and interline tickets, tickets bought with miles and corporate fares do not count.
2. **Book on garuda-indonesia.com or the FlyGaruda app, and enter the promo code INDO.** Travel agents, online travel agencies and Garuda sales offices can book it too.
3. **Choose your free domestic flight when you book.** You pick from the participating destinations shown. Mandalika (Lombok) is one of the four the program was built around, so confirm it is offered on your dates.
4. **Check your dates.** Your ticket must be issued, and your flight to Indonesia must leave, by 30 November 2026. Your return can be later. Stay 3 to 7 nights if you fly in from Singapore, Kuala Lumpur or Bangkok, and 3 to 21 nights from anywhere else.
5. **Already booked?** Contact a Garuda sales office or the call center and ask them to add it. It depends on seat availability.

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Good to know: the free seat is generally in the same cabin as your international ticket, Economy or Business. Garuda set aside 170,845 domestic seats. The free flight has no cash value, it cannot generally be combined with other discount codes, and it is cancelled if you refund, cancel or change your international ticket to a fare that does not qualify.

> I found these terms in a 14 August 2026 Jakarta Globe report, not on a Garuda terms page, and Garuda does not publish the full list of destinations. Check the code and your destination on Garuda's booking page before you build a trip around it. Everything below holds with or without the free seat.

At a glance.

How the four compare. The ratings are my own judgment calls.

Easy win | Good to know | Plan around it | $ is cheapest, $$$ is priciest.

	LAKE TOBA	BOROBUDUR	MANDALIKA	LABUAN BAJO
BALI EQUIVALENT	Amed, Sidemen	Ubud	Uluwatu, early Canggu	Nusa Penida, Gilis
BUDGET	$	$$	$$	$$$
SUGGESTED STAY	3 to 4 days	2 to 3 days	4 to 7 days	3 to 5 days
BEST FOR	Disconnecting	Culture	Surf and cafes	Diving and bo
CLAIM TO FAME	A volcanic lake the size of Singapore	The world's largest Buddhist temple	MotoGP on a surf coast	Komodo drag and Padar sunsets
LOCAL CULTURE	Christian (Batak)	Javanese, mostly Muslim	Mostly Muslim (Sasak)	Mostly Catho
WATER ACCESS	Lake swimming	None	Surf and beaches	Diving and bo days
CROWDS	Very quiet	Busiest of the four	Quiet	Some crowds
NOISE	Very quiet	Quiet villages	Busy town, quiet stays	Busy town, quiet bays

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	LAKE TOBA	BOROBUDUR	MANDALIKA	LABUAN BAJO
GETTING AROUND	Scooter Grab and Gojek: limited	Grab and Gojek work Driver or scooter	Scooter Grab and Gojek: limited	Walkable tow Check the ap

Lake Toba: the quiet one.

Best for slow travelers who miss the Bali of 20 years ago.



Amed, Bali. Lake Toba is the new (and improved?) Amed: the same slow mood, a lake instead of a sea, and no crowds yet.

Think Amed or Sidemen, but with a volcanic lake the size of Singapore. The action is on Samosir, an island in the middle of the lake, around the village of Tuktuk. Days are pier swims, scooter loops and long lunches. It is cheap and empty.

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The Capital Watch

Toba has been a government super-priority destination for years, with a rebuilt airport at Silangit and a wider ring road. The hotel boom has not come yet. If it takes off, it grows like Sidemen or Amed, not Canggu. This is the longest bet of the four.

Where to stay and eat

STAY

- **Tabo Cottages** (Samosir), *the classic pick:* family-run, lakefront Batak-style huts, a pool and a German bakery. tabocottages.com

- **Zoe's Paradise Waterfront** (Samosir), *the boutique pick:* small, sustainability-minded, with lakeside Batak shelters and cultural tours. Book via Booking.com or Agoda.
- **Taman Simalem Resort** (Tongging, north shore), *the escape pick:* a hilltop estate at about 1,200 m with farm-to-table dining, trekking and a campground option. Far from Tuktuk, so it suits a split stay.

EAT

- **Jenny's Restaurant** (Tuktuk), *the local classic:* a long-running favorite for grilled fish from the lake.
- **Hub Tata** (Tuktuk), *the healthy pick:* smoothie bowls and veggie bowls when you need a break from rice.
- **Coffee2Go** (Tuktuk), *the breakfast pick:* woman-run, opposite Marianna Hotel.
- Order the local dishes: *ikan mas arsik* (spiced carp) and *BPK* (grilled pork with andaliman pepper).

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Day to day: getting around, noise, safety, vibe

- **Getting around:** Tuktuk is small enough to walk. For the rest of the island, rent a scooter (about 80,000 to 150,000 IDR a day, so check what is included). Grab and Gojek do not work reliably on Samosir, so ask your guesthouse to arrange rides.
- **Noise:** very little. There are no clubs and the lake is quiet at night.
- **Safety:** low-key. The main things to watch are ferry touts and rough roads. If you ride, carry an international driving permit with a motorcycle endorsement.
- **Vibe:** slow, simple and secluded. Days are lake swims and scooter loops, and facilities are basic, so it suits couples, older kids and anyone who is not after nightlife.

Three days on Samosir

- **Day 1:** ferry from Parapat, check in at Tabo Cottages, dinner at Jenny's.
- **Day 2:** rent a scooter (about 100,000 IDR a day) and loop the island: the Ambarita stone chairs, Tomok village, the Simanindo Batak Museum.

- **Day 3:** cross the bridge to the mainland for the Tele viewpoint, then soak in the Pangururan hot springs at dusk.

Know before you go

- **Getting there:** the Parapat to Tuktuk ferry runs hourly, about 25,000 IDR paid on board. Medan's airport to Parapat is about 4 hours by car.
- **Cash:** bring rupiah. ATMs can run out and there is no money changer on Samosir.
- **Watch out:** touts at Parapat harbor who claim you must pre-book the ferry. You do not.
- **Signal:** Telkomsel and Indosat work best, so buy a SIM in Medan.

Borobudur: culture without the club.

`Best for culture lovers who want an Ubud-style base with one world-famous monument.`



A Balinese dance evening. Around Borobudur the draw is temples and village life.

The world's largest Buddhist temple sits in the green hills of Central Java. Treat it as a two-night village stay, not a day trip from Yogyakarta. As of late 2025 the structure ticket for foreigners was 455,000 IDR, capped at 1,200 people a day in eight time slots, and climbing needs a guide (Minimalist Journeys).

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The Capital Watch

The plan is a Buddhist-tourism hub with a tourism village and museum, run by the state-owned company InJourney. That was reported in 2023, so check how much has been built. My read: it will not become Canggu because there is no beach. It becomes Ubud, with a ticket booth.

Where to stay and eat

STAY

- **Plataran Borobudur** (Tanjungan village), *the eco-luxe pick:* a boutique eco-resort in a teak forest with 21 villas, a spa and a yoga center. plataran.com, Instagram @plataran.borobudur
- **Amata Borobudur**, *the quiet pick:* small, Javanese in style, by a river, with a spa. amataborobudur.com

EAT AND DO

- **Bukit Rhema sunrise** (the "Chicken Church" hill), *the sunrise pick:* a 4:30 am start, breakfast and hot drinks at Kedai Bukit Rhema, with an optional village bike ride. Instagram @kedai.bukitrhema. Message them a week ahead.
- **Punthuk Setumbu** is the cheaper sunrise viewpoint. Arrive up to two hours before dawn because it fills up.
- Skip the 1,000,000 IDR official sunrise tour from the Manohara Cultural Centre unless you want to be inside the complex at dawn.

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Day to day: getting around, noise, safety, vibe

- **Getting around:** Grab and Gojek are the usual way from Yogyakarta (about 42 km, 1 to 2 hours). Around the villages, hire a driver or rent a scooter. The temple has many steps.
- **Noise:** the villages are quiet. There is a mosque in nearly every village, so you will hear the call to prayer. It is part of the setting rather than a disturbance, but light sleepers can ask how close the nearest mosque is.

- **Safety:** low-risk. Watch for scams around the temple and for fast traffic and motorbikes on the roads.
- **Vibe:** calm and cultural. Early mornings, village life and teak-forest eco stays. Easy with kids who can manage steps, and quiet enough for a slow trip for two.

Three days around Borobudur

- **Day 1:** shuttle from Yogyakarta, check in at Plataran Borobudur, spa and an early night.
- **Day 2:** 4:30 am sunrise at Bukit Rhema with a village bike ride, then the temple in a late time slot with a guide.
- **Day 3:** Punthuk Setumbu sunrise if you want a second dawn, then back to Yogyakarta.

Know before you go

- **Getting there:** the Sinar Jaya shuttle from Malioboro in Yogyakarta is 20,000 IDR and takes 1 to 1.5 hours. The airport DAMRI bus is about 100,000 IDR.
- **Tickets:** book your time slot online ahead of time. Walking the temple structure needs a guide.
- **Timing:** skip weekends, public holidays and Vesak (May or June) for fewer crowds.
- **Pack:** a hat and sunscreen. The structure has no shade, and flip-flops are provided.

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Mandalika (Kuta Lombok): the one most likely to be the next Bali.

Best for surfers, remote workers and anyone who wants Uluwatu before it got busy.



The Kuta Mandalika sign on the seafront.

This is the closest thing to Bali's next chapter, and it already has two engines. The first is **MotoGP**: the 4.3 km Pertamina Mandalika circuit hosted this year's Indonesian Grand Prix weekend on 9 to 11 October 2026 (RRI). The second is the **POCARI SWEAT Run Lombok**, whose second edition in July 2026 drew about 9,200 runners, more than 70% from outside Lombok (Mandalika GP). Hotel and business gains are projections, not measured results.

The Capital Watch

Sport events fill rooms on a calendar, which is what investors want. Papi Sapi, a steakhouse brand from Uluwatu, has opened in Kuta Lombok, and when a Bali brand follows the crowd, the crowd is usually coming. The Honeycombers' 2026 guide says development is "creeping in" on ridgelines that once had open sea views (The Honeycombers). My read: Uluwatu in about 2014, and the best placed of the four for capital. Go now.

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Where to stay and eat

STAY

- **Somewhere Lombok** (Are Guling), *the design pick:* a clifftop Design Hotels property with an infinity pool and no TVs.
- **Sempiak Seaside Resort** (Selong Belanak), *the beachfront pick:* a boutique hillside and beachfront resort with 18 villas, described as the first luxury hotel in Selong Belanak.
- **Rawa Lombok** (central Kuta), *the in-town pick:* rustic-modern, with a rooftop pool and the Markisa restaurant. Instagram @rawa.lombok

EAT

- **Mama Pizza**, *the pizza pick:* sourdough, brick-oven, booked up nightly. Instagram @mamapizzaindo

- **Bush Radio**, *the burger pick:* a warehouse cafe with burgers, sourdough and smoothie bowls. Instagram @bush.radio
- **Folk Cafe**, *the view pick:* a hidden-gem bay-view cafe about 15 minutes out of town. Instagram @cafe.folk

Day to day: getting around, noise, safety, vibe

- **Getting around:** scooters are the norm (about 60,000 to 80,000 IDR a day). Grab and Gojek are unreliable in Kuta Lombok, so ask your hotel for a local driver. Rural roads are dark at night, so avoid riding then.
- **Culture and noise:** Lombok's Sasak community is mostly Muslim, so you will hear the call to prayer through the day. It is part of daily life rather than a disturbance, but light sleepers can ask how close a stay is to the nearest mosque. Dress modestly in villages. Kuta's main street is busy, and quiet is easy to find depending on where you stay: I stayed at Leha Leha and it was pin-drop quiet.
- **Safety:** a bag-snatching case was reported in Kuta Lombok in February 2026 (ANTARA). Keep bags on the side away from the road and avoid walking alone at night with valuables.
- **Vibe:** easygoing surf town. Cafes, yoga and beach days, with a scene growing around the circuit. Good for families, and the clifftop stays suit honeymooners. The surf breaks are for confident surfers.

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Three days in Kuta Lombok

- **Day 1:** check in at Rawa Lombok, Merese Hill at sunset, dinner at Mama Pizza.
- **Day 2:** a local boat from Gerupuk to the surf breaks, lunch at Bush Radio, yoga at the open-air Ashtari shala.
- **Day 3:** bay views at Folk Cafe, then a treatment at Matcha Spa (Instagram @spamatcha).

What the government is projecting

The state is putting numbers on it. On 21 October 2026, Coordinating Minister Airlangga Hartarto set 2027 projections for the tourism special economic zones: Mandalika at 1.6 million tourists and Rp8.6 trillion (about US$477 million) in economic value, against Kura-Kura Bali at 600,000 tourists and Rp600 billion (about US$33 million). Per visitor, that is roughly US$298 in Mandalika against US$55 in Kura-Kura Bali (my arithmetic). These are government projections, not results (ANTARA).

Know before you go

- **Timing:** race weekends and the July run are when rooms fill, so book early around them. Check the 2027 dates before you plan.
- **Surf:** local boats run from Gerupuk to the breaks.
- **Watch out:** ridgeline construction is changing the views, so look at recent photos before you book a view room.

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Labuan Bajo: the adventure base with big money behind it.

Best for boat days, Komodo dragons and divers who want Nusa Penida's wow factor.



In Labuan Bajo the boat is the trip: liveaboards, day boats and dive boats.

Labuan Bajo is the gateway to Komodo National Park, and the trip is built around the water: liveaboards, day boats, snorkeling with mantas, pink-sand beaches and sunset at Padar. The town itself is small and a bit scruffy.

The rules matter. Since 1 April 2026, park tickets must be booked through the SIORA system by a licensed boat operator, so there are no walk-ins. Foreigners pay about 250,000 IDR a day, plus ranger fees, with daily quotas on Komodo, Rinca and Padar. If Komodo is full, Rinca often has space (Komodo Guide, a tour company's site, so confirm on siora.id).

The Capital Watch

Big brands are arriving. Ta'aktana became Marriott's first property in Flores, and IHG's Crowne Plaza followed. A charter operator's 2026 write-up calls it the town's "biggest build-out ever" (Komodo Luxury), though it has something to sell. New supply is softening shoulder-season rates, while peak weeks from late June to early September still sell out. My read: Nusa Penida or the Gilis with a luxury layer on top, and prices likely to climb.

Where to stay and eat

STAY

- **Loccal Collection**, *the design pick:* a Mediterranean-style hillside hotel with a cliffside restaurant and cave spa. Instagram @loccalcollection
- **Menjaga Bay**, *the private pick:* small, quiet, with overwater bungalows and a jungle backdrop, about 45 minutes south of town. Instagram @menjagabay
- **Le Pirate Island**, *the castaway pick:* off-grid, adults only, stilted beach huts, no Wi-Fi and no air-con, a boat ride from town.

EAT

- **Kampung Ujung night market**, *the local pick:* grilled fish with sambal at the harbor, from around 6 pm.
- **Pondok Mai**, *the easy pick:* Indonesian seafood in the center of town.
- **Cafe.In.Hit**, *the coffee pick:* harborfront breakfast with Flores Bajawa coffee and decent Wi-Fi.

Day to day: getting around, noise, safety, vibe

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- **Getting around:** the town center is walkable. Beyond it, taxis run on fixed fares by zone (about 50,000 to 250,000 IDR). Grab and Gojek bike rides work, but car rides are unclear, so check the apps. Resort bays further out depend on shuttles.
- **Culture and noise:** Flores is mostly Catholic (about 78 to 79% in the West Manggarai regency), with a Muslim minority, so there is no daily-prayer rhythm like Lombok. The town center has traffic and street noise, and the northern bays are quieter.
- **Safety:** guard your bags on boats and moorings, and use certified guides. Roads have few streetlights after dark.
- **Vibe:** an adventure base. Boat days, diving and sunsets. The town is scruffy, and the resort bays are where it turns romantic and family-friendly. Long boat days can tire small kids.

Three days in Labuan Bajo

- **Day 1:** check in at Loccal Collection, sunset, then grilled fish at the Kampung Ujung night market.
- **Day 2:** a day boat to Padar and Komodo, booked through a licensed operator.
- **Day 3:** a dive trip with Dive Tribe Komodo (Instagram @divetribekomodo), then coffee at Cafe.In.Hit.

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Know before you go

- **Park tickets:** booked by your boat operator through SIORA, in three sessions (5 to 8 am, 8 to 11 am, 3 to 6 pm). Book 2 to 3 days ahead. Tickets are non-refundable.
- **Costs:** about 250,000 IDR a day to enter, plus a ranger fee per group (about 200,000 IDR for Komodo and Rinca, 150,000 IDR for Padar). Drones need a 2,000,000 IDR permit.
- **Padar:** time the viewpoint for the early or late session and book several days ahead.
- **Hotels:** book peak weeks, late June to early September, about three months ahead.

My ranking.

If I could only use one free flight, here is where I would go.

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1 Mandalika

`I want the next Bali.`

The strongest mix of fun now and growth later. MotoGP and the Pocari Sweat Run give it a calendar, the cafe scene is real, and it is still cheap.

2 Labuan Bajo

`I want to swim with mantas and see dragons.`

The best trip of the four if you love the ocean. It costs more and the park rules need planning.

3 Borobudur

`I want culture without Bali's crowds.`

An easy, rewarding trip. Third only because it has the least upside beyond the temple.

4 Lake Toba

`I want to disappear for a week.`

My most romantic pick and my longest bet. Cheapest and quietest, but hardest to reach and furthest from a boom.

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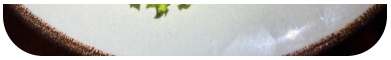

Wherever you land, order the nasi goreng.

Sources and dates

All checked 13 October 2026, program and Mandalika figures rechecked 27 October 2026. Pages without a printed date are marked undated. Venue picks are editorial opinion.

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