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Petri Hottola

KARAENTA FOREST, SULAWESI



Fig. 1. In the late morning, the road at Karaenta Forest was very busy indeed.

10th to 12th July, 2016, I had a stopover in Makassar, Southwest Sulawesi, between flights from Manado, North Sulawesi, to Padang, West Sumatra. The flights were on Garuda, the quality airline of Indonesia, a gem among the in general 'developing' tourism services.

The plan was to spend one night in Malino and visit Gunung Lompobattang in the next morning, before a return to the Sultan Hasanuddin Airport. Having had studied several trip reports and having made inquiries in Sulawesi, I had a good idea of the distances and expenses involved. Car rental, my first option, had proved to be impossible, because the rental companies had not been interested in making a deal with me, even though the orientation was straightforward and the roads in reasonably good condition. One or two inadequate replies to my requests were received, but there was silence afterwards. Therefore, I was prepared to hire a taxi to Malino, and a local taxi back to Makassar.

On arrival, I found out at the airport, to my horror, that all the local taxi companies were working under a scheme which only allowed taxi rides to the city, along predetermined routes. There were no other options and the airport tourist information claimed that they could not help me in any way. I had to try my luck among the several dozen of taxis in a line in front of the arrivals.

Eventually, a taxi willing to go to Malino was discovered. Our talks did, however, soon reveal that the driver was not to be trusted. He claimed that the ride to Malino would take 7 hours (!), one way. Respectively, Karaenta Forest was, according to him, 4 hours away. For the first ride, he demanded IDR 3.000.000 (€213) and for Karaenta, IDR 1.200.000 (€85, return). Arriving from Manado region, I knew that it was possible to have transportation for a full day by paying around IDR 1 million (€70), but that did not make any difference to him. Neither did it help to tell him that the distance to Malino was 70 km and to Karaenta 29 km, and the driving times were 2 hours and 45 minutes, respectively.

It was a bitter conclusion, but in the end I had to give up the visit to Malino, because no other taxi driver was ready to challenge this kingpin of swindlers. Beware of an elderly, stocky guy with moustache! So close to Gunung Lompobattang, but no way to travel the final leg, and it was already late in the afternoon... There were buses going that way, from the city center, but no detailed information. One would have needed tourist information to be able organize that.

Tired and increasingly depressed, I nevertheless kept on negotiating about Karaenta Forest instead. Finally, the above-mentioned swindler agreed to take me there, at 04.00 the next morning, and a price was also agreed on, IDR 850.000 (€60), including the waiting time. He took me to a hotel along the airport access road and I checked in. In the next morning, however, he did not arrive. I was left stranded at the hotel yard.

TRANSPORTATION

My spectacular failure with transportation to Malino probably does not qualify me to be an advisor in the case of Karaenta Forest, either. The following description of the morning after the no-show may nevertheless be of some value for others with a plan for a short visit during a transit.

First, I asked the hotel reception if they could help me to get a taxi for the Karaenta trip. To my surprise, they declined, being the first hotel I have encountered which did not even have any phone numbers for taxi companies. They did, however, offer me a free ride to the airport, where taxis were aplenty, even though they were all supposed to not leave their designated routes in the city.

Fortunately, that was not the case at the time of my requests. The first young drive I contacted, made a call to his boss, who agreed that the driver could make a deal with me. What is more, the driver did not claim the drive to be four hours one way but confirmed my estimate of 45 minutes,

and asked only IDR 300.000 (€21), including waiting, dismissing my proposal of IDR 750.000 (€53). He probably did not hear it. I knew that IDR 300.000 was not enough, but did not argue, being prepared to pay more at a later stage of the trip. It was time to go. The young driver had not been able to estimate the expense of time in this case, e.g. the three hour wait.

Not surprisingly, his boss brought the issue out, when I returned to the car at Gua Pattunuang, in Bantimurung. I then agreed to pay IDR 600.000 and an IDR 50.000 tip (€46) for the ride, a fair rate for the transportation, which had mostly occurred during a period when taxis were not in high demand. Unfortunately, the driver was not happy with his boss's rates, but started to ask for more, after we had already returned at the hotel. These final demands I declined, being annoyed by his behavior. I had, after all, just given him a cold can of Pepsi Maxi, as an extra tip.

In regard to the destination, Karaenta Forest is a virtually unknown entity in Makassar. It is better to refer to Gua Pattunuang, a well know cave in Bantimurung, at the edge of the forest. Everybody seems to know the cave, unlike the forest. There are cafes and restaurants in the area. The place where my taxi was parked was at -5.051797, 119. 718886 (check the coordinates at Google Maps). From there, I walked only about 2 km up and back, on the main road.

ACCOMMODATION

At the airport, **Ibis Airport** advertised rooms which were however not available. The hotel was fully booked, which I found out after going through their security check up. That included x-raying my luggage, for nothing. Instead, I was taken to the following hotel.

Darma Nusantara II (IDR 360.000, €25): A hotel definitely not recommended by yours truly, even though I happened to crash there for two uncomfortable nights. The place was next to empty, for a good reason, and I had only arrived there because of the recommendation of the taxi driver, who possibly received a commission.

The room had a reasonably good bed and a working television, but also dim lights and very basic amenities. Most importantly, the room was pretty damp and dirty. The best thing to do there was to sleep, if for nothing else, to avoid seeing the room and the hotel, which were both pretty depressing. That is what I did, as much as possible, and I also returned to the airport very early, in my eagerness to escape the unwelcoming clutches of Makassar.

There was a dining area, for tasteless, poor breakfasts, but it was closed for most of the time. Basic meals such as *nasi goreng* (IDR 25.000, €1.80) could be ordered to the room and they were of reasonable quality. It was important to leave the plates outside the room, on the hallway floor, where they stayed for at least a day, and attracted a plenitude of ants. I did not feel secure enough to leave my pilot case at the hotel room, but took it with me to Karaenta, storing it in the taxi.

BIRDS

Because of the delay caused by the struggle to find transportation (on the whole, three hours were spent to organize one short taxi ride!), I arrived at the edge of the Karaenta Forest slightly late, at 05.40. The taxi stopped at a restaurant/café, which was already open, and I walked the tarmac road up to the forest, or what was left of it. At the beginning, there was a huge road construction project going on, and a section of forest had been cut down. The presence of heavy machinery did not exactly help the situation. The rest of the time, till 08.45, was spent on the main road, despite its increasingly busy traffic. The lanes were narrow and the cars passing me within centimeters. There was one side trail, but I did not go far on it, because the ground was muddy and slippery. Birding, Indonesian style...

I could have made two visits to the forest, but had already got so disgusted by the difficulty of organizing one taxi, of which hundreds were vacant in the area, that I decided that a second run of disappointments and stress was not really worth of my while, and decided to rest instead.

Fortunately, the first visit was a productive one, despite the delayed arrival and other problems at the site. Sun was shining and the weather was fine in the morning. The endemic species new for me included **Citrine Lorikeet**, **Lompobattang/Red-eared Fruit Dove**, **Sulawesi Streaked Flycatcher**, **Black-ringed White-eye** and **Piping Crow**. The following list includes all the 27 species which were recorded during the three hours.

The **Piping Crows** were in the lower section of my walk. I could hear several crows in a valley on the left and one flew across the road from the right, in bright sunlight, against the blue sky. The pair of **Citrine Lorikeets** were seen at the top of my walk, from a vantage point. They sat together high in a lone dead tree, which itself stood on a meadow, high on the ridge. In this area, the **Lompobattang/Red-eared Fruit Dove**, **Sulphur-vented Whistlers** and the **Streak-headed White-eye** probably were at the lower elevational limit of their distribution, the first possibly after a food source?

The **Black-ringed White-eye** was located on the return walk, just before the edge of the forest and the construction site, low in a roadside tree. The pair of **Sulawesi Streaked Flycatchers** were right at the edge of the forest, close-by. All of these birds were seen exceedingly well in the good light conditions. Not many birds, but quality species...

Bird list

Red Junglefowl	3
Great Egret	1, a fly-by.
Citrine Lorikeet	2, a pair on a high ridge, in a tree at a small meadow.
Red-eared Fruit Dove	1, <i>meridionalis</i> , also split as Lompobattang Fruit Dove .
Green Imperial Pigeon	1, <i>paulina</i> ?

Sultan's Cuckoo-Dove	1
Glossy Swiftlet	100+
Uniform Swiftlet	10+
House Swift	40+
Grey-rumped Treeswift	4
Green-backed Kingfisher	1, calling at the road construction site, at sunrise.
Knobbed Hornbill	10
Pale-blue Monarch	3
Pacific Swallow	2
Sooty-headed Bulbul	8
Sulawesi Streaked Flycatcher	2, one pair, with superb views at the edge of the forest.
Sulphur-vented Whistler	2
Hair-crested Drongo	8
Golden-bellied Gerygone	1, <i>flaveola</i> .
Black-ringed White-eye	1, also with excellent views!
Streak-headed White-eye	1
Brown-throated Sunbird	10
Black Sunbird	15
Crimson Sunbird	3; one immature male, two females.
Grey-sided Flowerpecker	14
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	1
Piping Crow	1 adult + a number of calling birds down in a valley.

IN RETROSPECT

There really was nothing I could do to solve the problem with the taxis, in the given time. I had mistakenly thought that it was possible to hire a ride to Malino, just like things usually work out at airports, if it has not been possible to organize anything beforehand. In this case, both the tourist information and the taxi drivers failed me on arrival. Bad luck! Who knows, I may myself be motivated enough to give it another try one day. That is what I propose for other visitors with similar plans in the Makassar region. It would nevertheless be useful if anybody with recent success could publish contact information, for the benefit of both other visitors and the entrepreneurs who are there to provide honest service. We need ways to locate the good guys because the bad ones are there, too.

In regard to Karaenta Forest, a site I did not plan to visit in the first place, and therefore was not prepared for, there are more forested habitats three to six kilometers higher up the road, and side roads with less traffic, too. At least that is the way things appear to be in Google Maps satellite images. I do not know what I might have seen there but where ever one goes, the main thing is to stay focused and motivated till the end. It did not take much searching to score with the key species – the flycatcher, the white-eye and the crow – despite the less than ideal conditions and lack of detailed understanding of the site.

Good luck with your visit in Karaenta! (and perhaps also Malino...)