



→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

TONG TONG

THE HAGUE

The Netherlands has a long history with Indonesia and one of the largest festivals celebrating all things Indo. Simon Broughton has the full-on Indo cultural experience

don't go to many festivals where the prevailing memory is the smell. In the case of Tong Tong it's the intoxicating sweetness of tropical fruit. On one side of the main stage is a fruit cocktail bar, serving up luscious smoothies with banana, guava, mango and, on the other side, a vast fresh fruit stall selling fleshy rambutan, vast jackfruit and that object of passion and revulsion, durian (pictured above, right)—it tastes like heaven, but smells like hell.

The Tong Tong Fair is the biggest Indonesian festival outside Indonesia, but a more accurate description is the largest festival of 'Indo' culture in the world. The

Indo people (*Indisch* in Dutch) are the result of Dutch colonial history in the East Indies, with a mixture of European and Indonesian ancestry. The Indo population in the Netherlands is estimated at 400,000, but Tong Tong reaches well beyond the Indo community and attracts visitors from all over Holland and beyond. 'If you don't have the time or money to travel all the way to South-East Asia,' say the organisers, 'come to the Tong Tong Fair in The Hague and imagine that you are in the East.' For its 50th edition in 2008, it attracted 133,000 visitors, its highest attendance, but consistently over 100,000 visitors come for the food, the fair

and the festival. As the brochure says in Dutch (a language that is not as difficult as people think) 'Die Beste Mix van Oost en West.'

Tong-tong is an onomatopoeic word, like so many in Indonesian, describing a hollow log drum, beaten to call people together like a church bell. The fair is held in a vast tent complex on the Malieveld, a large grassy space close to the old town and the station. The Hague is, of course, the diplomatic capital of the Netherlands and around the Malieveld there are trees planted by the ambassador of each country in the EU. That multicultural atmosphere is extended inside, but in a much more exotic way.

Tong Tong is a huge 12-day bazaar, which started out as Pasar Malam Tong Tong in 1959, modelled on the great Indonesian fairs like the Pasam Malam (Night Market) in Batavia (the colonial name of Jakarta). These were also multicultural with Javanese, Sumatrans, Chinese, Europeans, Indians and Armenians. "In those great Indonesian *pasars* you had commerce, food, music and dance all mixed together," explains the artistic director of the Tong Tong festival, Arnaud Kokosky. "You could buy everything including the latest rice cooker and shaver. And you can see that here — there are massage chairs and toilets

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that will spray your butt." There are also music shops, furniture stalls, books and masses of handicrafts.

Kokosky is from an Indo family and trained as a Balinese dancer. I talk to him at the Pondok Cempaka restaurant, which won de Zilveren Rijstlepel (Silver Rice Spoon) prize for the best restaurant in the fair. There's no doubt that for most people the food is the highlight. *Nasi goreng* (fried rice), *satay* (skewered meat) and *gado-gado* (salad with peanut sauce) are just the beginning. Indonesia is one of the world's great sources of spices and every variety is available at Tong Tong. "We think of culture as music and dance and film, but cooking is also a form of art and culture," says Kokosky. One of the aims of the Tong Tong Festival is "to bring audiences who wouldn't normally think of going to a concert or modern dance. And they find they like it and it costs half as much as a similar performance outside the festival. People might come for the food, but they also get in touch with cultural things."

Over the space of four days at last year's Tong Tong festival, I was able to see a wide variety of shows: the young Jakarta-born pop singer Anggun; one of Java's leading contemporary dance groups JeckoSDANCE (pictured opposite); Widrosari *gamelan*



ensemble performing the music of Lou Harrison, and — a real highlight — Nomads, starring three singers from differing ethnic backgrounds resident in Holland.

Nomads have already toured Holland to great acclaim, but their show was revived specially for Tong Tong. It featured Brazilian-born Lilian Vieira, Julya Lo'ko from a mixed Indonesian Moluccan background and Izaline Calister from Curaçao. The superb show also included songs in Indonesian, Papiamentu, Portuguese, Spanish and English.

Aside from class acts like Nomads, the musical joy of Tong Tong is the chance to hear *kroncong* (pronounced 'keron-chong') music, the most seductive of Indo musical creations. It mixes Indonesian, Portuguese and Dutch ingredients in an achingly nostalgic style like Bing Crosby or the *boleros* of Ibrahim Ferrer in a South-East Asian sauce with ukuleles, guitar, violin, flute and percussion. Launching their latest CD, was the Indisch Muzikanten Collectief (IMC), a nine-piece band including Portuguese or what they call *fadoguitar*. They're Holland's only *kroncong* band and have been going 25 years. "Kroncong is not Indonesian music," says band member Pim Fuchs, "it is a blend of Portuguese *fado*, Dutch and Indonesian music. It's a mixed

creole culture." And IMC mix it more into bluegrass *kroncong* with dobro guitar. This year Orkes Kroncong Bintang Surakarta comes from Indonesia, with the big-name singer Waldjinah.

From Indonesia was a resident band from Bandung called Behind the Actor (because they grew out of a theatre group). They were playing both *kroncong* and *dangdut*, one of the popular Indonesian styles combining Indonesian *kendang* drums, flutes, guitars and a rock'n'roll attitude. But to me it seemed like cruise-ship *dangdut*.

Tong Tong isn't a world music festival — for that you need to go to the Music Meeting in Nijmegen, in eastern Holland (www.musicmeeting.nl), which happens around the same time — but Tong Tong is a great culinary, cultural and olfactory experience. And The Hague is a beautiful city with a wonderful Max Escher museum, the other essential attraction. Over a *saté kambing* (goat kebab) I met two guys who'd come on a bus from Luxembourg. "It's a great trip to another world," they said. That's true of both Tong Tong and Max Escher. **N**

DATES The next Tong Tong Fair runs from May 22-June 2 2013

ONLINE www.tongtongfair.nl

