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## AFLUTTER A FERRY RIDE AWAY



Whatever the fate of Singapore's casino, Batam will not lack tourists – gamblers or otherwise

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WHEN I told my mother I was going to Batam, she raised her eyebrows. The Indonesian island, 30 minutes by ferry from Singapore, is notorious for its sex trade.

Having spent a night on the island, however, I must say this – if you've not been to Batam in the past year or so, then hear me out. It isn't what you think.

Sure, the unmetalled roads still exist outside the city area and the crime rate is high, but the black sheep of Indonesia's family of islands is slowly changing.

There are still beat-up cars on the roads, but there are also brand-new-looking Mercedes-Benz cars, Honda SUVs and Mitsubishi Galants. In fact, SUVs seem to be all the rage now. Alongside *kam-*

*pongs* now lie golf resorts. But the most notable change in the Batam landscape is the large casino resorts.

The small backyard casinos still survive, but there are also three casino resorts, with a fourth opening soon.

### PROLOGUE

I met my "tour guide," who would introduce me to the casinos of Batam, at the ferry terminal. I had caught the ferry at 8pm after a day at work.

Known as a junket operator, Mr Johnson (not his real name), a Singaporean, arranges for people to visit Batam to gamble. He takes your passport and handles everything – ferry tickets, immigration forms, board and lodging. If you are going to gamble, everything is free

– except for the cash you'll need at the gaming tables.

At the ferry terminal, we watched returning passengers disembark. Mr Johnson said with a grin: "You can tell who made money and who didn't. The losers always look at the floor and shuffle by; the winners are always yakking on the phone or smiling."

He estimated that 90 per cent of the gamblers at the casinos are Singaporean.

Also waiting to board were a few aunties and more than a few middle-aged men. The aunties all seemed to be with groups of friends; the men were alone.

After the 45-minute ferry trip, Mr Johnson drove me from the ter-

terminal to Nagoya, the town centre. It was nearly 10pm, but the roads were still busy. The McDonald's in Nagoya closes at midnight, the food centres are still packed at 2am, and the casinos are, of course, open all night.

At a food centre, two of Mr Johnson's friends joined us for supper and told me about Batam's gambling scene.

"Gambling is considered illegal in Indonesia, but it is 'legal' as it is

allowed by the local government. We junket operators act as the marketing and service arm of the casinos in Singapore for customer acquisition.

"Junkets can range from small part-time operations to full-fledged ones which can make millions in a year. Each junket would have its own stable of rolling girls. These girls track the amount of money


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