

Where the Heart Stayed: A Foreign Student's Tale in Aceh



<https://potretonline.com/2025/04/27/where-the-heart-stayed-a-foreign-students-tale-in-aceh/>

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Aceh, located on the island of Sumatra, Indonesia, is a very special place for me, known for its vibrant people and natural beauty. The idea of pursuing my Islamic Studies at IAIN Ar-Raniry (now called UNIVERSITAS ISLAM NEGERI Ar-Raniry) was first suggested to me by my good friend, Ismail Abas—perhaps now a professor still teaching in Brunei Darussalam. At that time, in 1986, he was one of the pioneering foreign students in Aceh and was about to graduate from IAIN.

Having spent several years in Aceh, my friend knew well how the application process worked. Earlier on, he had also recommended me for a position at the Islamic Propagation Centre in the South Pacific, a project planned by the Head of the Regional Islamic Da'wah Council of Southeast Asia and the Pacific (RISEAP). As a student leader, Ismail was well-connected with regional Islamic organizations.

Standing at a crossroads between Aceh and the South Pacific, I reflected deeply on my path. After much contemplation, I chose Aceh. At that critical moment in my life, I believed that pursuing knowledge was more important than securing a job.

I first set foot in Aceh in July 1986, two months before the start of the new academic year. For over a month, I dedicated myself to preparing for the entrance exams, which included Bahasa Indonesia, Arabic, English, and other subjects related to the National Constitution of Indonesia. Thank God, my hard work—studying day and night—paid off. I passed the exams and received an offer to pursue my undergraduate studies at IAIN.

In my first few months as a first-year student, everything felt challenging. The weather was hot, and I had to get used to using groundwater. Aceh seemed a bit laid-back for someone like me, coming from a middle-class background in my home country. The bureaucracy outside the campus was overwhelming, especially when it came to getting my documents stamped so I could legally stay as a student.

As things got tougher and I felt I couldn't bear it anymore, I thought about leaving and returning home. At that moment, I reflected on the hardships endured by the Holy Prophet and his faithful companions. I decided to stay, holding on to the last bit of patience left in my heart. *Masya Allah*, as I completed my first semester, things began to change.

By then, I had started stepping out of my comfort zone at the student centre to explore the campus area (Kopelma Darussalam), downtown Banda Aceh, and the villages nestled between the campus and the modest city centre. By the end of my first year, I had made friends with some local Acehnese and other students who had also come to study in Aceh. Though the bureaucracy remained, my acclimatization to the weather and the friendships I built gave me the strength and spirit to continue my stay.

As a self-sponsored student who was careful with spending, I managed my finances well. Occasionally, I even chipped in to help my Acehnese friends so they wouldn't miss a semester of classes. Among all the friends I made, Armia and Hawardin were the ones who stayed in contact with me until the final days of my student years in Aceh. Armia was from Northern Aceh, while Hawardin came from Medan.

As a foreign student in Aceh, I strengthened my resolve by choosing not to return to my country during the semester breaks. With patience, perseverance, and persistence, I endured life within the campus area throughout the entire duration of my program. I only returned to my home country in mid-1992.

During most of the semester breaks, I indulged myself in pleasure reading. I immersed myself in good literature, the works of Muslim thinkers and philosophers,

the rise and fall of Muslim empires, poetry, and more. My favourite places to visit included the grand mosque called Baiturrahman—also known as the State Mosque of Aceh—Pantai Lhoknga (Lhoknga Beach), Tanoh Abee, the Island of Sabang, and many other interesting spots.

The State Mosque, with its stunning architecture, was particularly dear to me. Besides its majestic and captivating beauty, the mosque—considered a national pride of the Acehnese people—boasts many domes. During my time in Aceh, it was acclaimed as the most beautiful mosque in the entire Southeast Asian region.

Back then, a small canal of crystal-clear water ran around the mosque. All visitors were required to dip their feet into this canal before entering the prayer hall. Like many others, I developed the habit of sitting on the staircase after spending time in the mosque, dipping my feet into the cool water. Masya Allah, it was a wonderful experience—feeling the chill of the fresh water as it flowed gently around the mosque.

Sometimes, my companions and I would sit with our feet submerged in the canal, reminiscing about events from our younger days back home. Those were truly precious moments.

Lhoknga Beach is incredibly beautiful and attracts a large number of visitors on weekends. In the past, opposite the main area of the beach, there was a waterfall. After swimming in the sea, people would finish their visit by rinsing off the salt from their bodies under the waterfall. Lhoknga is also home to a large cement factory. I wonder if the factory is still in operation today.

Tanoh Abee, located about forty kilometers from Banda Aceh, is well-known for its Dayah (a Traditional Islamic Madrasah) and an ancient library (Perpustakaan Kuno). When the Dayah was first established, it was the earliest of its kind in Southeast Asia. The library houses some of the oldest manuscripts in the Malay Archipelago, many of which focus on Islamic theology, Islamic Jurisprudence and Sufism. I hope this library, which is a source of pride for the Acehnese people, still exists today.

The Island of Sabang has its own unique attractions. Its crystal-clear waters and scenic landscapes attract many visitors from mainland Aceh as well as tourists from other places. My few days in Sabang brought great joy to my heart. During one of my semester breaks, I spent most of my time walking around the island, exploring its natural beauty and interacting with the locals. I still remember how, during my walks, schoolchildren would shout and yell to get my attention. Because of my full-

grown beard and friendly demeanour, they assumed I was an Arab. They would cheerfully call out to me in Arabic, saying, “*Kaifa haluka?*” (How are you?).

The above recounts some of my experiences living and studying in Aceh between 1986 and 1992. At the time, Aceh did not benefit from a significant infrastructure development budget. However, according to recent media reports, the region has undergone rapid transformation following the 2004 tsunami. Today, people enjoy a more progressive lifestyle, with improved roads and highways making travel easier. Notably, the once treacherous road from Medan to Banda Aceh has now been replaced by a modern, well-maintained highway.

In wrapping up my experience studying in Aceh, I must admit that while the bureaucracy beyond campus walls was often frustrating, the warmth of the Acehnese people left a lasting impression on me. As a foreigner, I was met with open hearts and generous spirits. Their genuine hospitality, humility, and deep sense of Islamic brotherhood didn’t just make me feel welcome—they made me feel at home. In the end, it wasn’t just a place I studied in; Aceh became a place I grew to love.

***Author's Note:**

Dear readers, please be informed that the account presented in this article is based solely on my personal recollection. I apologize for any inaccuracies that may have occurred and welcome any corrections.

***Note from Potret Online:**

The views expressed in this article are those of Dr. Mohd Abbas Abdul Razak, from the Department of Fundamental and Interdisciplinary Studies, AHAS KIRKHS, IIUM, and do not reflect the views of Potret Online.