

# Indonesia – people, culture, language

## A guide for businesses

### The country

Comprising 17,500 islands, Indonesia is the world's largest archipelagic state. With a population of over 200 million, it is the world's fourth most populous country and the most populous Muslim-majority nation, although officially it is not an Islamic state.

Following three and a half centuries of Dutch colonialism, Indonesia secured its independence after World War II. Its history has since been turbulent, with challenges posed by natural disasters, corruption, separatism, a democratisation process, and periods of rapid economic change.

Indonesia's islands are home to many distinct ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. The Javanese are the politically dominant and largest ethnic group. As a unitary state and a nation, Indonesia has developed a shared identity, defined by a national language (Bahasa Indonesia), a majority Muslim population, and a history of colonialism (and rebellion against it). Indonesia's national motto, "*Bhinneka tunggal ika*" ("Unity in Diversity" - lit. "many, yet one"), articulates the diversity that shapes the country – though sectarian tensions and separatism have also led to violent confrontations that undermine regional stability.



Jakarta

### Did you know...?

- Indonesia is known as the "Emerald of the Equator" because 57% of the area is covered by forest.
- Indonesia uses three calendars: The Western (Gregorian), the Islamic and the Javanese calendars.
- Indonesians consider the head to be the seat of the soul. One should never touch or pat anyone's head when visiting Indonesia.

### Fast facts

**Location:** South-eastern Asia, archipelago between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean

**Capital:** Jakarta

**Official Language(s):** Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia)

**Population:** 242 million

**Ethnic Groups:** Javanese 45%, Sundanese 14%, Madurese 7.5%, coastal Malays 7.5%, other 26%

**Religions:** Muslim 88%, Protestant 5%, Roman Catholic 3%, Hindu 2%, Buddhist 1%, other 1%

**Currency:** Rupiah

**Dialling Code:** + 62

**Time:** + 7 hours GMT

### Language

**Talking the talk:** the positive impression you will make by speaking a few basic phrases of the local language cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used Bahasa Indonesia phrases to help you on your way.

English	Bahasa Indonesia
Good morning	Selamat Pagi
Good day	Selamat siang
Good evening	Selamat malam
Goodbye	Selamat tinggal (if you are leaving) Selamat jalan (to someone who is leaving)
How are you?	Apa kabar?
I am fine, thank you	Saya baik-baik saja, terima kasih?
Yes	Ya
No	Tidak
Please	Silakan
Thank you	Terima kasih

## Diversity

- Indonesia is a hugely diverse nation. It is made up of over 17,500 islands (6,000 of which are inhabited) and over 300 ethnic groups.
- Each province has its own language, ethnic make-up, religions and history.
- Most people will define themselves locally before nationally.
- In addition there are many cultural influences stemming back from difference in heritage. Indonesians are a mix of Chinese, European, Indian, and Malay.
- Although Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, it also has a large number of Christian Protestants, Catholics, Hindus and Buddhists.

## Face

- Due to the need to maintain group harmony the concept of 'face' is important to understand.
- In Indonesia the concept is about avoiding the cause of shame ("*malu*").
- Consequently, people are very careful how they interact and speak.
- Although a foreigner can not be expected to understand the nuances of the concept it is crucial to keep an eye on ones behaviour.
- One should never ridicule, shout at or offend anyone. Imperfections should always be hidden and addresses privately. Similarly blame should never be aimed at any individual/group publicly.
- One manifestation of the concept of face/shame is that Indonesians communicate quite indirectly, i.e. they would never wish to cause anyone shame by giving them a negative answer so would phrase it a way where you would be expected to realise what they truly want to say.
- Bahasa Indonesia actually has 12 ways of saying "No" and several other ways of saying "Yes" when the actual meaning is "No" .



Mount Sumuro and Mount Bromo

## Meetings and negotiating

- It is common for Indonesians to enter a meeting room in rank order. Although it is not mandatory that you do the same, it will give a good impression.
- The first time you meet with a company, much if not all of the meeting will be devoted to getting-to-know-you conversations. Even if the business topic is never broached, the meeting will be a success if the Indonesians with whom you are meeting think well of you and want to schedule a future meeting.
- New ideas or proposals may be communicated at meetings, but do not expect an immediate response. Indonesians do not make hasty decisions because this might be viewed as not having given the matter sufficient consideration.
- When conducting meetings, remember that Indonesians are indirect communicators who will go out of their way to keep someone else from experiencing shame ("*malu*").
- They often speak in circles, use the passive voice, approach a problem in a very different way than you might think they should.
- "Jam Karet" (rubber time) describes the Indonesian approach to time. Things are not rushed as the attitude is that everything has its time and place. Time does not bring money, good relations and harmony do.

## Meeting and greeting

- Greetings can be rather formal as they are meant to show respect.
- A handshake is the most common greeting accompanied with the word "Selamat".
- Many Indonesians may give a slight bow or place their hands on their heart after shaking your hand.
- If you are being introduced to several people, always start with the eldest or most senior person first.
- Titles are important in Indonesia as they signify status. If you know of any titles ensure you use them in conjunction with the name.
- Some Indonesians only have one name, although it is becoming more common for people to have a first name and a surname, especially in the middle class.
- There are several ethnic groups in Indonesia. Most have adopted Indonesian names over the years, while some retain the naming conventions of their ethnicity.
- Business cards are exchanged after the initial handshake and greeting.
- Business cards should prominently display your title. This serves to enhance your image and credibility.
- Hand the card with the Bahasa side facing the recipient. Use two hands or the right hand only to exchange business cards.
- Examine a business card you receive before putting it on the table next to you or in a business card case. It is important to treat business cards with respect.

## Further resources

UK Trade & Investment: Support for those wanting to do business in/with Indonesia. [www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk](http://www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk)  
The British Chamber of Commerce in Indonesia: working towards promoting business relationships between Britain and Indonesia. [www.britcham.or.id](http://www.britcham.or.id)  
PriceWaterhouseCoopers: Free Doing Business Guide for Indonesia that offers potential investors with a valuable overview of Indonesia's economic climate, business opportunities, and the legal and tax environment. [www.pwc.com/Extweb/pwcpublishings.nsf/docid/1576CCF32D4AB1588525690B000E284F](http://www.pwc.com/Extweb/pwcpublishings.nsf/docid/1576CCF32D4AB1588525690B000E284F)  
The Economist: an in-depth country briefing covering mainly business and politics. [www.economist.com/countries/Indonesia/](http://www.economist.com/countries/Indonesia/)

Please note: While every effort is made to ensure accuracy, the Regional Language Network does not take responsibility for the content of this briefing. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the Regional Language Network or of CILT, the National Centre for Languages.

**RLN South West**  
Tel: 01392 264374  
info@rln-southwest.com  
[www.rln-southwest.com](http://www.rln-southwest.com)

