

Travel Tales: Indonesia's Wild Spin on Ping-Pong

In the Indonesian archipelago of Mentawai, ping-pong has evolved into an odd game of reflexes and relief.

by Eddy Patricelli



It's a blinding series of attacks. Arms and legs whip toward me. Tiny balls ricochet off my body. Spectators laugh with each barrage. I would duck, but there's no hiding. My attacker gathers a small orange piece of ammunition, raises it in his cupped hand for all to see, then crouches — his wooden racket drawn taut behind his ear as if he were steadying an arched bow. He glances my way. "Three seero."

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At home, I love pingpong. Here in the Mentawai Islands, a tiny Indonesian archipelago, the game confuses me. I hold a weird paddle. The mahogany table before me is covered with sand. I want to brush it off, but the local teens here won't let me. Even weirder, they aren't cheering for my opponent. They aren't cheering for me. They seem to be cheering for the ball. Every time it bounces they make short bursts of odd noises. All of them are smoking. It's 7.05am.

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Photo courtesy Kandui Resort

An hour ago, shouts from these teens woke me from a bad dream. In it, a tsunami was rolling over this low-lying island, over my beach hut and my bed with me in it. My mind is a mess. An earthquake devastated the nearby city of Padang just days ago. Tsunami warnings have been constant. I'm told that's not unusual here. The region is one of the most seismically active in the world. Now these teens have given me something else to ponder: this game.

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I look at the artwork carved directly into my pingpong paddle's open wooden face. A question gnaws at me: How does one hit a pingpong ball with a wooden sculpture?

Crouch. Uncoil. Slam. "Four seero."

The ball is dented, more cookie jar than sphere. I hold it up to the group. "It's broken," I tell them. A teen examines the ball and tosses it to my attacker, who again crouches and raises his paddle. "Four seero."

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"Wait. What?" The teens nod for me to keep playing, to ignore the dented ball. "But ... but it's broken."

“Ball better this way,” one of them says. *Better?*

30 Slam. The ball buzzes past me. “Five seero.”

The teens point behind me. I scan the sand. No ball. They shout for me to find it, but even they don’t speak a common language. Most hail from Padang, a developed city on Sumatra. A few were born here in the Mentawai Islands, a time capsule with its own vernacular. The only shared aspect of the two languages has neither a past nor a future tense. It’s all right here, right now. It’s
35 all about the ball.

I find it 10 steps from the pingpong table. I look back at the teens; bed hair, bloodshot eyes and cigarette smoke.

I spot a different ball lying in the sand in perfect condition. “This one?” I ask, holding the new ball high.

40 “No no no,” they protest. “Other ball. Other ball.” I toss the mangled ball to my attacker. He tosses it back to me. It’s my serve. I hold the dented ball up, raise my weird wooden paddle and look across the sandy table. None of this makes sense. *Whatever. Just swing.*

Contact. The ball bounces true. My attacker returns it. We rally. The teens shout at the ball — wishing, willing it in some fashion with each bounce. My attacker slams a winner. The teens sigh,
45 clearly disappointed.

Yesterday, a local elder told me that only a few of these teens returned to Padang to see their families after the earthquake. “Earthquakes are part of life,” he shrugged. “They’re devastating, but ever-present.”

“Six seero.” My attacker wants me to serve. We rally. The teens shout at the ball, louder as the rally
50 builds steam.

My attacker mis-hits. The ball rises high in the air, a lob — an easy slam for me. I turn my shoulders, crouch and uncoil — arms and body unleashing at ...

The ball bounces off its dent and darts sideways off the table. My swing parts yards of empty air. Roars of laughter fill it. Teens fall to their knees, wipe their eyes, lean on one another for support.
55 Even my attacker, now lying in the sand, looks like a baby on his back, cooing at the world above.

Eventually, one of the teens holds the dented ball before me. “Ball better, yes?” he asks beaming. I nod, take the dented ball and smile. To the teens, to me, nothing at this moment could be better than an unexpected bounce that brings joy.

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