

## On the Bali tourist track (*Bali, Indonesia*)

*Viewing Shadow Puppetry from the depths of Plato's cave:*

(*Ubud and environs*):



Waking this morning to the cacaphony of chickens, ducks and scrapping dogs in our Ubud homestay, I resolved to wipe the slate clean of the first impressions of Bali. The dominate one in Kuta (just a few miles from the airport) where we stayed our first night was the faux pirate ship swarming with drunken Aussies...

Yet even in escaping the blaring bars and pushy hawkers of Kuta, I felt no less a walking ATM machine on arrival in Ubud. In every transaction, whether shared taxi fare, snacks, or admission fees, I suspect my 12-year-old daughter and I have been paying double—even treble—the going rate.

Of course, as a newly arrived *bule* [foreigner] here, unfamiliar with the bank notes, one expects to be taken for a sucker. Yet more taunting is the suspicion that the Balinese, spooked by my very appearance, have been demanding outlandish prices just to push me away and thereby avoid an inauspicious transaction... e.g.: In the doorway of the Nirvana homestay, our first pick from the *Lonely Planet* guidebook, the matron's eyes instantly went to my gloved fake hand. When I asked her room rates, still staring, she barked 150,000 rupiahs a night: 4-fold the expected rate. Even though poor T.E. was tired, she submitted to walking one more block to the Wena home stay, where the resident family across the inner courtyard has, thus far, shown no hint of a glove phobia...

So though the day among the myriads of fellow tourists in Ubud, we have been dutifully following the guidance of the *Lonely Planet*: shutter-clicking and video-taping our way through the Ubud Monkey Forest and Elephant Cave and finally taking a half-day temple tour by microbus—beginning with the Besakih Temple, an hour away...

As T.E. and I climbed the steps towards the Besakih temple amid the screech of hawkers I had all but reached a breaking point. While the stalls of “uniformly beautiful and intricately carved demon masks” were exactly as described in the guidebook, we barreled straight though to the top of the steps. I barely restrained telling one temple attendant pushing an armload of dangling pendants into my chest to ‘fuck yourself!’

Of course, I well understood that as a rushed tourist, my impressions are more unreliable than those of the shadows of shadows in the depths of Plato's cave. While there can hardly be a more exotic' destination for the western sensibility than Bali, the brush with otherness over a week is more on the order of a freak show or an adolescent acid trip than with a cross cultural engagement...

Still, however shallow the impressions, it is difficult not to make assumptions. In this regard, even in the dazzle of decorative flowers and the bedecked acolytes in the temple ceremonies, I was far from captivated by the exotic aesthetics. In utter contrast to the awe of Thai temples, I felt no racing of pulse here—no sudden clarities.

By the late afternoon of the tour, under the pagoda beside Klung Klong Square, amid an army of fellow video-tapers, I had the distinct impression of being amid the hordes at the Pacific National Exhibition on a sticky August afternoon. Just as with the tug of the kid's hand towards the Hellelevator ride—I was eager to get away. I was almost ready to take the first *bemo* back to Kuta and rebook an early departure. Yet grimly, with the non-refundable tickets for Fantasy Mountain and the Riverboat Ride in this cultural Disneyland already in pocket, I stoically wielded video camera shoulder to shoulder with the legions of equally-sweaty ticket holders...



So how is T.E., my intrepid 12-year-old daughter and travel companion, bearing up? Again, by turns, plucky and picky: she has turned up her nose at everything on a menu yet has sprung up with a smile after slipping in the mud under a courtyard banyan tree (partly captured on video). She has submitted to the one-bucket cold shower yet has gone sullen when I declined to immediately buy the crudely carved chess set that took her fancy. Definitely, these last few days would be trying for any 12-year-old girl but hopefully, this glimpse of otherness will leave some positive mark on her memory—if not on her character...



"It's the micro-experience of Lizard Island in Queensland that will really blow you away. There's so much going on in a space half the size of your fingernail. Really, Lizard Island is one of the best—*definitely* one of the best dives in the South Pacific."

Before the evening performance of *Wayang Kulit* [shadow puppetry], I craned to hear the conversation between the two American couples in the seat behind us. It began with the intimation that they both are keen dive-tourists; then moved to a subtle probing as to who was the richer. Then there followed a duel of name-dropping of exotic resorts ("Isn't that a Malcolm Forbes ship?" "Yes, they're definitely they're the best live-aboards!").

Though a half hour of maneuverings, both dropped their tantalizing clues without revealing their names, home cities or careers.

"Last week in New York I was talking with another friend who'd also just done the outer Barrier Reef..."

After a 15-minute delay, the *gamelan* struck and the *Wayang Kulit* began. While what was to follow seemed a curious mix of Ramayana myth with Punch and Judy slapstick, I could not deny that the eavesdropping on these would-be Scotts and Zeldas was quite as engaging as the play of shadows on the stage.



Later drawn by another handbill, T.E. and I elbowed our way among a crowd of fellow dutiful tourists to watch a brief performance of Balinese dancers. Even while jostling to get a video picture free of bobbing heads of fellow video-shooters, we could not fail to be amazed by the eye and finger movements of those Balinese dancers! Strangely inhuman—the facial expressions and hand movements of the dancers seemed to simultaneously embody in equal balance—the chaste and the erotic...



This morning T.E. and I rented bikes and managed to veer slightly out of the tourist conduit into the outskirts of Ubud town. We negotiated perilous traffic to the 2 km. stretch of carving shops where carvings sold at a third the price as in the town shops.

While cycling the rutted dirt road behind the paved road, I stopped a few times to snap photos—which according to the *Lonely Planet* bible, Balinese usually don't mind. Curious it was to see carvers in 2-3 adjacent shops working on replicas of the same design. Often whole families seemed to be involved. Before one shop, mother, father and 2 little boys crouched before a stack of wood with carving knives scraping at a Rodineque bald figure with head between knees. Behind them, were stacked hundreds of copies of the same carving in various stages of completion.

I fleetingly imagined a rec room shelf in Perth or Sydney where one of these figurines would eventually be displayed. In lifting it up momentarily from between a beer mug and football trophy: might a thought be spared for these “happy peasant” artisans?

(Lake Batur-Tulamben)



In chatting with a fellow guest at the Ganda Mayu Bungalows in Tulamben, it was as much a sting as a relief to discover that apparently for the first time in Bali, we paid the same price charged to other ‘bule’ tourists in Bali. Still, the same friendly Swede who had also just come from Lake Batur where he’d also done the standard hike to the rim of the Agung Batur volcano— informed that he’d paid half the rate in the lakeside as we had paid for our room. That sting was accompanied by the embarrassment of the crude prints I’d bought on the terrace just to get rid of the ‘artist’ who pestered us while we poked our way through the bony fish lunch.

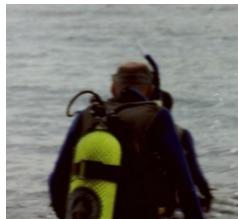
Still, even with the relentless touting and over-charging—there can scarcely a cheaper destination in the world today for tourists than Bali. In the aftershocks of the massive devaluation of the Indonesian Rupiah last year, one needs to constantly remind oneself the locals here are struggling to make a bare living.

Reflecting thus, tonight I determined to suppress the pettiness of constantly feeling cheated. Indeed, under their circumstances, one should admire the efficiency with which in-coming

planeloads of tourists are reaped. The stunted puffy-eyed, squeaky voiced villagers on the shore of Lake Batur are particularly shrewd harvesters! As long as the circulating supply is endless, why give a hoot what is written about your village in the 'Scams and Annoyances' section of some *bule* guidebook?

In contrast to Lake Batur, Tulamben has thus far been a gem. With the shadow of the Agung volcano looming above and a rocky shore that keeps away the seekers of sandy beach, there is here the most spectacular underwater scenery glimpsed in all the years of snorkelling. It was relished for barely 15 minutes yesterday but hopefully can be experienced again, *inshallah*, this morning before the departure back to Ubud. Only wish we'd come straight here on arrival....

*(Tulamben-Ubud)*



Before catching a microbus back to Ubud yesterday afternoon, I took a guided dive off Tulamben beach. Although I paid for an hour and got just over 20 minutes underwater, the underwater scenery was the most stunning ever beheld. As I suited up in scuba gear and followed my guide in finning a hundred metres offshore, T.E. held the video camera on the rocky shore. Beside my young Balinese guide (who was very likely not PADI qualified) I submerged 15 metres to the deck of ghostly USS Liberty, scuttled in World War Two. In passing above the coral encrusted surface amid wavering blue fish I was reminded of Ariel's poem from *the Tempest*:

*Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes:  
Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange...*

After 57 years under the warm Bali Sea the Liberty really had been transformed into something "rich and strange".

However enthral to the undersea magic, I could not for an instant forget T.E. sitting alone in a strange place watching the water anxiously... In passing through the middle of the sunken Liberty deck, I was momentarily stabbed with a horrific image of her helpless terror should her father not surface...

When I did re-emerge above the waves, the first sight in pulling up my mask was of T.E. in exactly the same position on the shore where she had been 20 minutes earlier— still aiming the video camera towards me...My beautiful daughter!



Just 2 hours after the dive, we boarded a shuttle bus for the 3 1/2-hour ass-jarring ride back to Ubud.

Sitting behind a middle-aged woman with British accent, I eavesdropped on her conversation with the fresh-faced daddy-sponsored American couple on an extended world travel 'gap year'.

"I've done all of Northern India and Nepal," said the older woman, "But I haven't done Southern India yet. That's next on the agenda after I do Flores and Irian Jaya."

"Like I graduated 5 years ago, and I still don't have a profession," said the girl with a corn-fed midwestern accent. "Some of my friends are like, married and having babies. I just can't imagine getting into a rut like that!"

As T.E. leaned sleeping against my side, I listened with increasing rue to the old travel bum (who did mention she had been teaching English in Jogjakarta) listing her 'conquests' to the younger set. As the talk moved from the scavenger hunt for passport tattoos, to 'adrenaline rushes' (diving, bungy jumping, sky diving) in exotic locales, yet again I nursed my contempt for the commodifying of travel as the consumption of exotic experience.

I could hardly restrain leaning forward, tapping the girl's shoulder and asking: *'If you aren't working then who, perchance is bankrolling your global adventures?'* To the older lady, I would have asked: *'so what is it that drives you into this frenzy of passport stamping? A series of jiltings? Maybe the frustration of childlessness?'*

"I love skiing, too, said the older woman, "But most people don't realise just how dangerous it can be."

Departing from the glib tone of her travel cataloguing, she suddenly dropped a shocking detail:

"You can injure any part of your body and live. But not when you hit your head. That's what happened to my 14-year-old daughter when we were skiing in Grenoble, France 2 years ago. She went into a deep coma and never recovered. For months I was devastated. I didn't want to live. But then I started thinking what my daughter would want me to do. I could hear her voice saying: *'Mommy, you should get out and see the world!'* I'll never stop grieving but I'll also make sure to enjoy every day of my life. So that's what I've been doing."

Scorn was wiped out by a blast of hot shame. I had thought the poor lady shallow when, in fact, she was bearing unimaginable suffering. How arrogantly presumptive I had been! Perhaps all along, seeing I was with my daughter—she had been directing her conversation at me. Yet again I missed an opportunity to make a fleeting, yet mutually meaningful human contact. Why do I persist in such standoffishness with fellow travellers? With the sleeping T.E.'s head pushing against shoulder, I was deeply chastened.



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