

# Bali-ho!

**I** USED TO be afraid to write about Bali, for fear my articles would encourage people to come to this island paradise. The ensuing increase in tourism would not only destroy the culture, the gentle, honest, caring quality of the people, but also help to ravage the natural resources and balanced environment.

Two realizations enabled me to finally change my mind and write. First, I no longer have the fantasy that my writings are so impactful that after reading my paltry words, thousands of you would hop on a plane and go to Bali seeking to rape and pillage its beauty.

Second, full-scale tourism is escalating so quickly that a few thousand North Americans would hardly dent the destructive effects tourism has already had on the island.

Bali is a small diverse island in the Republic of Indonesia, which is one of the world's largest archipelagoes, and the fifth largest country. It is only 140 km by 80 km and lies just south of the equator, in the Indian Ocean. The majority of the two- and three-quarter million inhabitants are Hindu and it is the only predominantly Hindu island in Indonesia, which is the largest Moslem country in the world.

This sun-drenched, spiritual, Hindu, artistic island has withstood the Dutch colonialism from 1882 to 1942, and the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945. Now it is facing its final test. Can it preserve its culture and way of life against the hordes of tourists looking for cheap beer, surfing and an escape from the urban jungle?

In 1975, my wife, Bonnie, and I landed in Bali as part of a 14-month sabbatical tour around the world. Our four-week stay there ended up being the highlight of our trip. Back then, it seemed that every traveller was infected by the good nature, guiding generosity and artistic spirit of the Balinese people.

Kuta, which had already been transformed from a sleepy village to a thriving beach tourist community, was quiet. There were few motorcars, a couple of hundred motorcycles and lots of bicycles. We stayed at Losmen Sareg, a family-run pension for about \$2.50 a day.

We had a single room with a double bed, cold showers, flush toilet with no toilet seat and all the tea and bananas we could eat. Across from our room was the family residence where we could see the manager's young wife, bare-breasted, preparing the meals, cleaning, and feeding her child. We felt like part of the family and were included in their ceremonies and assisted with all our problems and requests.

Just as the Hindu artists, musicians, mystics, dancers and intelligentsia from Indonesia fled to Bali during the Moslem invasion in the 14th century to take up residence, the last of the Hippie generation with the ideals of peace, love and brotherhood seemed to congregate together in the early 1970s making Bali a special place to be a traveller.

The streets were so quiet you could hear the cycles passing on Kuta Beach Road. From the first crossroad to the beach, which was about half a mile, the narrow paved road was dotted with a few small hotels, restaurants, and stands selling clothes and tourist things.

A few more pensions and restaurants were situated on the roads perpendicular to the beach and down some unpaved paths. You could learn the whole map of Kuta with all the restaurants, banks, shops and hotels in just a few days.

The sunsets were incredible. Everyone would gather on the beach around five and sit watching the sun fall into



## DOCTOR ON THE WING

By Dr. Mel Borins

the ocean, illuminating the sky in reds, yellows, oranges and blues. After the sun went down the show really began. We would sit amazed that nature could create so many different hues.

If I would have seen a painting with the colors of these sunsets I would have thought the artist was making it up from his imagination. They just couldn't be true. After seeing 20 or so sunsets on Sunset Beach I realized no artist could capture the combination of colors.

After the sunset we would go and have freshly prepared rice, noodles, shish kebab, shrimp and fish. We could gorge ourselves for three to six dollars for two. Fruit stands were set up on corners and the Balinese would squeeze and crush the mangosteens, salaks, pepaya, bananas and mangoes with a hand-rotated juicer, mixing in ice and selling it for about 20 cents a glass.

We were willing to risk the chance the juices and milkshakes would give us Bali-belly or worse. Thankfully we always remained healthy. The pace was slow, the Balinese were relaxed and gentle and everything was a celebration or ceremony.

Inevitably, 14 years later, Kuta is no longer recognizable. When we returned in 1981 with our then three-year-old son, we mourned the loss of our innocence. We had changed and so had Bali. We were no longer students, we didn't want to stay in spartan accommodation, and we had a son to look after.

Japanese and foreign businessmen were buying property and setting up hotels, restaurants and fancy shops with solid walls, not just open stalls plastered with straw mats.

The once secluded beach had numerous hawkers continually haranguing the tourists to buy carvings, clothes, cold drinks and massages. The Australian pub culture was creeping into existence and the streets were noisy with hundreds of motorcycles carrying Balinese teenagers in blue jeans saying "Hello mate" in a heavy Australian accent.

We cried and felt depressed for days. Soon we realized that the essence of Bali hadn't really changed. If you got out of Kuta life was still the way we remembered. The ricefields, rituals, ceremonies, communal way of life was still strong and unique.

We quickly forgot about the way it had been and still loved the place so much that we stopped idealizing the past and stayed a whole marvellous month. We made new friends, found new favorite restaurants, and watched our son Larry playing in the waves for hours. The sunsets hadn't changed a bit. The best things in life were still free.

It is thought Hinduism came to Indonesia from India and was spread to Bali by mystics and teachers. Hinduism blended with the existing animistic beliefs, where spirits of animals,

inanimate objects, ancestors, and good and evil were worshipped. There is a supreme god called Sanghyang Widhi and many manifestations or aspects of the one god.

The three principle manifestations are Brahma the creator, Shiva the destroyer and Vishnu the protector. And a great many purely Balinese gods and spirits manifest themselves in normal life.

The thing that makes Bali unique in the world is the inclusion of prayer, worship and celebration in every aspect of daily life. Hindus pray three times each day, at sunrise after the morning food preparations, at high noon and at sunset. Ostensibly most people just pray in the morning.

The women of the household prepare the food for the day and afterward little offerings of rice, flowers, incense on small woven palm leaf trays are placed in various spots around the home to bless the spirits that look after everyday life.

For example, an offering might be placed on the dashboard of the car, the steps of the home, in the temple that resides in every home, and in the surrounding streets, business shops and even in front of tourists' rooms in order to bless and make life safe.

The number of temples in Bali is truly remarkable. The temple in every home helps to preserve the Balinese way of life. This makes religion and worship more personal and part of every family.

Every village has at least three temples. The "pura dalem" or temple of the dead is located near the graveyard or cremation area. This is the place for Durga, the incarnation of Shiva's wife. The "pura desa" is the temple for the spirits that take care of the village community in its day-to-day life.

This is the domain of Brahma. The "pura push" or temple of origin is for the ancestors and lords of the soul. It is dedicated to the village founders and is where Vishnu resides.

### The temple in every home helps to preserve the Balinese way of life, and makes worship part of every family

Eight temples are considered so important that they are temples for the whole island and are located in power points, like spokes of a wheel, surrounding the whole island. They are believed to protect the island from all sides from bad outside influences.

In addition there are family temples, clan temples for groups of families with similar descendants, temples for different organizations like the irrigation organizations, rice growers cooperative and fisherman's societies, dedicated to the spirits that protect these industries.

Not only do the religious pray three times each day, but people visit the temple every five days, every 15 days, every full moon, every dark moon, and especially every 210 days on the anniversary of the founding of the temple. Then, of course, there are many other holidays and special days when visits to the temple are important.

All ceremonies of the cycle of life are celebrated in the family temple in each home. So at births, marriages, birthdays, during sickness or for other reasons the family will visit the temple to pray. Oftentimes family members from all over Bali and Indonesia will return to their family home to pray together, during special ceremonies.



A temple at Mengwi: Every village has at least three temples, while eight temples hold special importance for the entire island.

The focus on ritual, ceremony, and the coming together of religion into daily life ensures that the family unit remains strong and close-knit. Even though many young people have been influenced by the worst of Western culture, there is a strong respect for tradition and custom.

Not a day would go by that I didn't see women dressed in temple dress, balancing on their heads huge baskets of offerings laden with fruits, flowers, and all different foods, marching in single file to some celebration.

While in Bali, I was invited to a tooth-filing ceremony, a dedication to the opening of a store, a few cremations and a number of temple anniversaries. There was usually music, elaborate offerings, prayers and sometimes traditional dance and plays.

It is the culture and way of life just as much as the cheap prices, beautiful beaches and excellent climate that attract tourists. Anyone interested can seek out and take part in ceremonies, festivals and religious events. The Balinese are open and welcoming. Yet in the process of sharing their culture something gets lost. What is the price-tag on Balinese culture? Can a country sell its culture and still maintain it?

In their dance, paintings, shadow puppet plays and in their religious life there is always a balance between good and evil. They struggle to maintain this balance between the life-giving and destructive forces. I was raised to somehow believe that good was going to win out in the end. But the Balinese don't expect a triumph of either one. Both demonic and heavenly forces are catered to and accepted as part of the cosmic order.

So it is with tourism. Tourism brings upgrading, capital investments, an upgrading of daily life, more opportunities, and stimulates their creative genius. However, I tend to see the negative effects. As each area of Bali becomes touched by foreigners, the focus of the community turns away

from tradition toward making money from tourism.

This plays havoc with the structure of family and communal village life. The young people seem to pick up the worst from the West. Violence, drugs, blue jeans, loud music are just some of the contaminating influences. The forests are being destroyed indiscriminately, and the rivers, beaches and oceans are being polluted.

The cultivation of farmlands, the organization of villages and even the creative arts are communally run. The society is held together by a sense of collective responsibility and sharing that permeates everything. This collective responsibility produces considerable pressure on the individual to conform to traditional customs and values.

If Bali is to maintain its culture and quality of life then it will be because of its family-oriented and communal society, commitment to spiritual awareness, attention to ritual, and richness of culture.

But there must be a constant vigilance to regulate tourism to certain acknowledged areas. The billions of dollars brought in to the country must stay and be returned to the people to be used to raise their standard of living.

If huge hotels with elaborate facilities are built, then surrounding villages must benefit by putting some of the money into proper sewage disposal, clean water supplies, proper latrines and roadways, as well as electricity in every home. Alcoholism, AIDS, the violence of films and videos, must be seen as serious threats and preventive measures must be taken before the problems escalate.

The struggle to maintain balance continues. Don't wait to see if the culture can survive. Go to Bali before there is irreversible destruction. Tread softly when you visit. The people are so gentle.

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