

Indonesian Timor

So we arrived in Indonesia exhausted and mad. But the madness did not end at the border. We hired a truck to take us to Atumbua, and naturally paid dearly. At first the truck was empty but at the first village Atapupo, the truck stopped and loaded up with household items despite our strong complaints. We had to sit on top of a huge load. There were about a dozen of us.

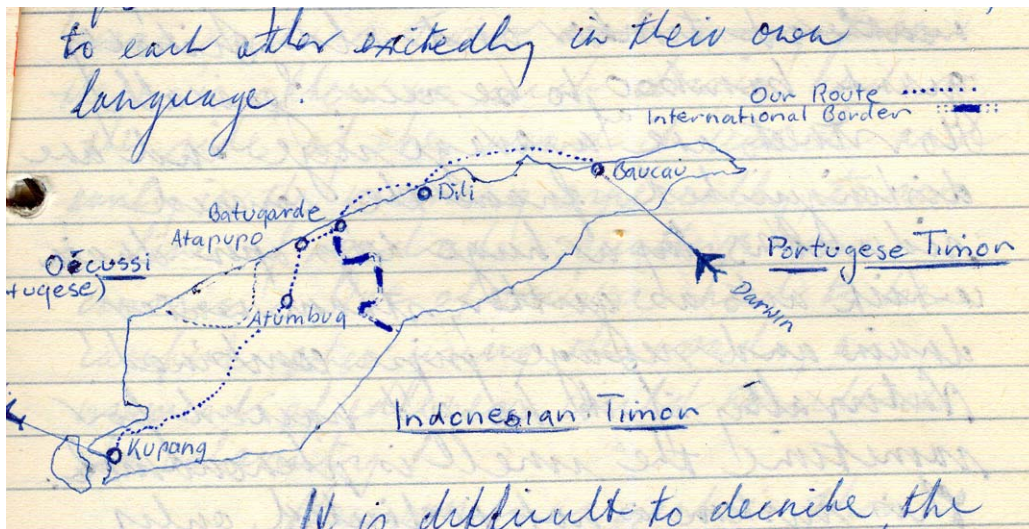
It had long gone dark and we bounced around on top of our uncomfortable 'seats' on one hell of a road. It was almost a nightmare when one of our number let out a scream.

Someone had been bitten by a scorpion. We were by this stage in a state of terror. The truck blithely careered off into the night regardless. Luckily the bite was not from an over-dangerous species (of which there are many in this part of the world) and the victim suffered only nausea and a sore leg.

We woke next morning to find ourselves surrounded by a large group of Indonesians who were all in a state of inquisitive excitement pointing and giggling as we each opened our eyes to light of day. We had been left in the police station at Atumbua and had slept the night in the courtyard. The law in Indonesia states the necessity of passport stamps by police when staying in any place, hence the reason for our present plight.

After having passports stamped we found a 'Losman' to sleep the night, then off to the market to find something to eat. We were immediately pleased by the huge variety and quality of the produce. Many fruits were new to us and we had fun with the stall holders who taught us what part of each fruit to eat. It was obvious strangers were a rare sight here, always it seemed we had a crowd of people especially

children around, talking to each other excitedly in their own language.



It is difficult to describe the villages in this part of the world to some-one who does not know Asia. Atumbua looks ramshackle, but not to the point of falling down. The streets are of earth however a little patch of sealed road is seen sometimes, but in a very bad condition. The shops are many and small and open straight onto the street and are packed to overflowing with all manner of goods. No building is painted or has ever seen paint, so there is much grey weathered timber and old giant bamboo to be seen. Generally streets are average size and are distinguished from the covered sidewalks by huge deep open drains which act as gutter, storm-water drain and sewerage pipe combined! Naturally if it hasn't rained for sometime the smell is phenomenal. This system is not restricted to villages in Indonesia but all suburban communities throughout the east near and far. Singapore, Jakarta, Penang, Bangkok, all India, Katmandu and all cities in Arab countries use this system. In Indonesia it was quite common to turn a corner and see people using the common drain using a more direct approach, simply relieving themselves by squatting over the

drain with one foot one either side! In more rural areas there is often no such drain, and the side of the road is used early in the mornings especially. To see a line of roadside squatters was common. One had to be careful using the roads, a moment of idleness could result in calamity!

Now come a part in this story I prefer not to remember, not alone write about. It portrays our move from Atambua to Kupang. We traveled by road on a bus (actually we tried to hitch-hike but the only vehicles we saw belonged to UNESCO and would not stop). The road without exaggeration looked just like a dry creek bed in outback Australia. It had never been graded and the only difference between it and the surrounding landscape was that the 'road' had no trees growing on it. The 'bus' was in fact a truck with tiny deckchairs on the tray covered with a crude canvas awning. It was so full that one could not move without disturbing the other passengers. The two rows of 'seats' had been cunningly fitted with short planks which bridged the 'aisle' and rested on the armrests, and so formed more seating. There were many large young Americans and Europeans on board who, in these conditions where even the natives were cramped, were painful to watch as they sat knees to chin on the tiny seats. One of these sat behind us with one knee in my back and one in Heathers, which caused us great deal of misery. In fact it felt as if our kidneys had been permanently damaged.

On Monday 5th March, our second day in Atambua we went to board the 'bus' as promised, but to our dismay it had been filled already and we would have to wait a couple more days. It sounded like Portuguese Timor all over. We were mad. All of us had had enough and it was plain the idea was to trap Europeans in Atambua where our money would be appreciated.

No-one would help us so a dozen of us decided to help ourselves. We pushed our way onto the next bus and put our luggage on the roof and roped it on. With the bus full of travelers and locals, and one other guy and me stopping anyone removing the roof luggage, we demanded action. Action we got. Six or so police walked out of the station and poked automatic weapons at us. Still we sat and called their bluff! They argued and shouted at us until finally the driver agreed to take us at 1 1/2 times the normal fare. We were powerless and so agreed.

The ride began at nine am and we headed off somewhat contented knowing we were moving. As is always the case in Asia the bus stopped to pick up any extra persons who flagged the bus from the roadside. So the already crowded bus was packed and seemed to move more slowly than ever. We went on till nightfall and into the night. By this time we were extremely tired of the absurdly rough road, and our bodies developed sore spots where knees and elbows poked into us. The deck chairs gave no support whatever and we swung this way and that in unison, and bumped our heads constantly on the roof, even though it was a good foot away.

This continued until the very sight of the 'road' ahead made one feel nauseous. A two-foot drop could be seen in the dim headlights, then one would brace oneself for the jarring drop. More than once we all had to stand outside while the bus negotiated a tricky spot such as where a bridge was missing or there was water over the road.

Ultimately the trip became a pure nightmare and we constantly hoped for the bus to just stop. But it would not. At three am it finally did stop, not because we were anywhere of consequence but because the driver was completely

exhausted. I remember him just climbing out and disappearing. After a time we wondered where he was and in a sleepy daze found him spread-eagled on the road behind the bus. Not knowing what to do we did likewise and there we all slept for an hour. Finally at 5 am we arrived at Kupang. We had taken over twenty hours to cover 270km. Heather climbed out and vomited

I had no intention of staying in Timor any longer and so with a friend I set off to find two air tickets to Bali. I had to pull the ticket agent out of his bed (he was supposed to be in his office) and by 11am we were in the air and on our way to Bali.