

My favourite island, and Java

It almost couldn't be true. The difference between Bali and Timor was staggering. In Bali the very air was happy. The people, a cheery lot, could not do enough for us and soon after our free ride to Kuta beach we were happily at home with a clean bed, a spotless bathing room and surrounded by friendly people. There is one place on earth I could go at any time. It's Bali.

Our first day on the island was spent wandering the beach and chanced to see a cock fight held among the coconut palms. But first we had to rest. So we slept. Yum.

We spent seven days on his beautiful island, we ate superbly, prices were very affordable. We saw two traditional Balinese dances by sheer chance – the Ketjak (or monkey dance) and the Barong (*we saw very few tourists in Bali and the dances were part of everyday activity and custom*). Both were fascinating and sometimes frightening to watch.

The surf at Kuta was pleasant and powerful – I spent many happy hours bodysurfing from sun-up to sun-down. Strangely the locals didn't seem to swim at all. The sea was empty.

The variety of food was wonderful – and all tasty. If we starved on Timor we pigged ourselves on Bali. The little restaurant at Kuta (not Chinese) sold an amazing variety of food and drinks. Omelettes, pancakes of all sorts, vegetarian dishes such as Gado-gado (a dish of lightly fried vegetables topped with a peanut sauce which is ground between two stones in front of you).

On one day Heather and I rode a Honda motorbike into the mountains and up the immense slopes of Besakil where we saw the biggest Hindu temple on Bali. It was composed of a multitude of pogoda style shrines. A guide related stories as we walked (most of which went in one ear and out the other). On the way home we discovered a village of stone carvers and stopped to watch a group at work. The things they produced were fantastic. The intricacies and variety of pattern is amazing. Too heavy to carry home though – many statues were well over life size. We were careful not to make any mistakes on this trip, we had no driving license. It's normal to buy a license, but that doubled the price and we were lucky enough to find a guy who would hire without one - good show.

Life at Kuta was fabulous, it was easy to see how many travelers decided to stay. One climbed out of bed at a lazy hour and is usually greeted by the friendly losman owner with a couple of huge bananas and a cup of coffee or tea. Sometimes there were little round cakes of coconut or other sweet things to eat. Always there would be salesmen with their bags of woodcarvings batik prints, or paintings to sell, and we could spend a full morning looking at bargaining and if you had the loot, buying. The quality was really good, real black ebony, each piece superbly carved and polished – this stuff sold for a fortune back home. After this we would usually visit the restaurant next door for a well earned breakfast and so ready to begin our plans for the day.

Balinese farming practice really impressed me. The staple was rice and on Bali all stages of growth could be seen at the same time. Newly planted, growing, ripening and harvesting all go on together. There are no seasons.

Rice requires ample water to ensure good growth and the Balinese are masters of irrigation which is entirely powered by gravitation. The highest fields in the mountains are the first irrigated and water is diverted then to lower fields etc. Not a single piece of land is left unused. The water runs in small channels in the sides of dividing walls of fields. This requires continued and undivided attention by farmers. The translucent green of young plants in morning sunlight is something to be seen.

At 5.30am Wednesday March 14th we took a bus to the extreme western end of the island and crossed the narrow straits to Java. One of the most heavily populated pieces of land in the world. By 5pm we were in Surabaya, a large city in eastern Java. As we alighted from the bus we were greeted by literally scores of Betjaks (bicycle transport) and each wanted to take us to a cheap hotel. It seemed to us these guys were really intent on taking us for a ride, and rather than take the risk we decided to walk. All along our route we were constantly hassled by these drivers who couldn't comprehend the fact we preferred to walk. I finally had to be quite nasty to some that were too persistent.

Java, unlike Bali is Moslem, and as one travels through one can literally feel the difference in the way of living. What a change from the Balinese! The people were no longer a happy laughing lot and the 'stared-at' feeling is very apparent. So without too much ado we took a train out first thing next morning and by 4.30pm and were in Yogyakarta, the ancient capital of Java.

As we stepped off the train it began to lightly rain and we decided to walk along what we thought was the main thoroughfare looking for a place to stay. Luckily we met some other young travelers and they took us to their losman.

This was not nearly as clean as our Balinese experience and on our second night realized our bed was full of bedbugs. Heather was badly bitten all over her body and the itching was terrible. Luckily for me I was not very tasty. We tried pulling a plastic sheet over our bed and putting flea powder on the mattress but neither had the slightest effect on the little beasts. Finally we told our host who got rid of them with some concoction (don't ask).

Traffic in Yogyakarta is mainly bicycle, betjak, rickshaw, motorcycle or truck. Cars are very few and so the city has the appearance of pulling, pedaling, running and trudging people. People everywhere. We almost felt drowned in the sheer mass, and to cross the road meant contending with a barrage of foot powered vehicles, all coming at different speeds with seemingly no apparent order.

Our days in Yogyakarta were spent mainly on the street simply walking and finding things of interest – a roadside bicycle repairman, a magician, kerbside street sellers. The market was a trip in itself. I spent quite a few hours there making watercolours of the people. The market was full of rats which would be scampering over the food and wares in broad daylight with not so much as a glance from the populous.

A couple of days were spent at the 'school' for batik. Yogya is famous for this and for a very small fee we both went to an artist's studio and tried our hand at the art. We learned quite a lot and came away with our own jantings (hot wax tools). Shops in the city were well stocked with batik and we spent a lot of time looking at the huge variety. At the 'Water – palace' there were countless shops which sold only batik. Finally we visited a couple of galleries which held the work of internationally known artists which put all to shame. Prices

were out of our range but at \$100A we were very tempted. The work was exquisite.

Silver is also renowned in Yogya and one afternoon we visited a workshop. With few tools and no technological equipment these craftsmen came up with superb stuff. Most was filigree and weight of silver minimal, unlike Balinese silver. On Sunday (a day same as any other in Yogya) we took a bus to the south coast for a days outing. The bus was really crowded, little old ladies squatting Indonesian style on the floor as we jolted along. After 30km we came to a swift flowing river. To our surprise we had to cross using native pole barges. These are long narrow canoes and we were made to sit quietly with a dozen locals while a pole-man stood at each end and negotiated the rapids – real congo style. To get to the other side we headed upstream someway, then hit the current at mid-stream and were hurtled downstream past our goal, then had to pull upstream to our disembarkment area. Motorcycles, bicycles, chooks all included which made the whole affair top-heavy.

We had to walk another three or four km before reaching the black sand beach of the south coast. The water was so wild I decided to forget swimming even though the day was unbearably hot. I had contracted an ear infection in Timor and had been advised not to swim by Indonesian doctors, however we found a little pool just back from a village and there we cooled off, keeping my head dry.

Another day saw us climbing a rough track, the vegetation thick and weird. A lot of water dripping, chestnuts then fog until we could see nothing but cloud. We sat and ate a little fruit we had carried and as the pea soup rose we found ourselves half-way up to a lookout. The track flattened out, then finally arrived up to the lookout watching station. There

in front of us rose Kaliurang with her head in the clouds, the very active and dangerous volcano of central Java. Here we had tea with the officer and signed his visitors book. This was the 'early warning' system. An eruption was due that year.

Its Thursday 22nd and we are again jolting along in an Indonesian bus with chickens on our laps and betel nut juice slippery on the floor. Finally we climb out and here in a huge coconut grove stands a huge ancient monument. Old, ancient old, with relief carvings covering the sides, and broken-off pieces littering the countryside. A stairway runs up one side which we alight and are soon standing at the summit. A pyramid temple, Borobodur. Stone bell shapes house sitting buddahs. A religious place, so old the rain has worn the surfaces of the hard granite so that windward sculptures are more subtle, then turning a corner completed intricate detail is found.

We pulled out of Yogya station at 6pm Sunday and by 6am were in Jakata. After a quick visit to toilette we asked about buses to the docks. Soon we were blasting our way through crowded streets. Outside is not a place I want to see for long – there is so much poverty here. Many beggars and street dwellers. A rag-clothed woman moves a tin can of liquid onto a small fire made of rubbish while her children sit staring at this filthy noisy world.

There is a crowd at the docks. We sit and eat lunch with a policeman- a friendly chap who speaks broken English. The rice like all Javanese food is full of chilli, the day is unbearably hot. We sweat and sweat more because of the chilli. It's the hottest we've tasted, I forgot to ask for no chilli.

A Canadian has just lost all his money and passports-carried in his back pocket, idiot. Each man for himself here. The ticket office tries to sell us tickets at 5500 instead of 4700 Rupiah. Hassle then more hassle. After one hour we get our price.

By eight am we are headed out of this sweltering port and as the breeze from the open sea hits us we breathe a sigh of relief.

We are lucky, this crate is jamm-packed, they are like sardines down there. The smell is indescribable. We stay on deck, the Indonesians don't seem to be interested in deck travel. We love it, the stars and the breeze.

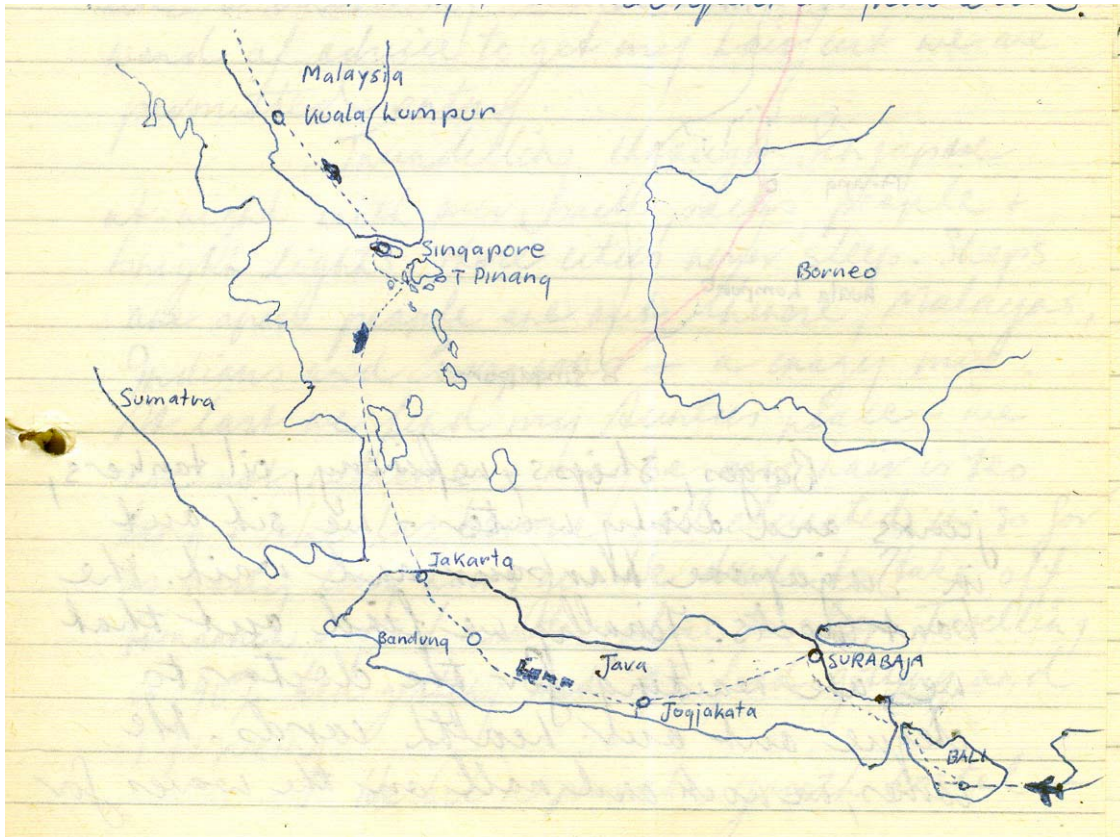
Food on board is almost unfit to eat. The daily ration is a bowl of boiled rice and a minute portion of boiled bad fish (either head or tail, and it is bad). If you are lucky you may get half a boiled duck egg. We had the sense to carry a large bag of fruit, veges and biscuits. For two days we sailed and crossed the equator! On 28th we pulled into an island and dozens of long motor boats move out to meet us, 55mts off-shore. A mad scramble ensued as the owners threw up ropes and hooked on to us. After this we stare wide-eyed as the sailors scramble up the ropes and on board. People rush to get off the ship. We stand wondering what is going on. Are we being invaded? We know these waters are pirate infested. Finally, we find out we are at Tanja Penang, our place of disembarkment, and to reach the island we must climb down into these little boats. So we join the queue and make the hazardous trip from rolling ship to rocking boat, first throwing our packs down. Next moment we are ploughing through waves and someone is asking us for money. I hesitate, the other Europeans pay. I wait. We reach the dock and get off. There is no complaint and we walk

away to find the ride was included in the fare. Those who paid gave their money away. It is 6 am so we try to get a ride to Singapore, only to find both ferries are full. Now we understand the reason for the rush.

After finding a hotel room we walk to the market and buy coconuts and pineapples. We join forces with the other European travelers and make a huge fruit salad, yum. That night we find a place where hundreds of tables are surrounded by little stalls each of which produces its own groovy dish. There's a stall for special drinks another for fried chicken, another for pork and yet another makes sweets. After a few moments the little Chinese cook bring out their dishes. What a neat system! We find that this idea is used a great deal in Singapore and Malaysia.

Next day we are off to Singapore aboard the ferry. The price is the same as that we paid from Java to T Penang-ridiculous but we have no choice. To make us feel better we get to eat a rice, fish and prawn dish with egg. Hot chocolate (I don't believe it), a sweet rice thing that looks strange and apple – a big delicious juicy apple, our first for months.

So far on our trip we have spent \$495 American counting everything including Australia. Nearly 4 weeks were spent in Indonesia.



Barges, ships, refinery, oil tankers, junks and dirty water – we sit out in Singapore harbour and wait. The boat rocks, then finally we find out what we are waiting for, a doctor is coming to check out our health cards. He finally arrives and we rock and roll on the waves for an hour. He tells me I have no name on my health card and advises me to write it on, I do. At last we dock, its nightfall and we are in another strange city.