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Bali and Lombok, 2012



July is meant to be one of the best months to visit Bali as it is the dry season. BUT, it is also high season and the country is inundated with tourists (apparently August, when Europe goes on holiday, is the absolute peak season!). Tourism is HUGE in Bali and everywhere you look there are people working really hard to service it:



craftsmen everywhere skilfully carving wood or stone, weaving fabric, making baskets; markets, small shops and stalls selling crafts, clothes, kites (July is kite season) and tourist 'tat'; lots of restaurants and bars, and hotels ranging from the ultra-sophisticated to simple backpacker 'homestays'. But, if you are looking for a quiet destination with few tourists be sure to spend some time on neighbouring Lombok.



Bali IS beautiful. Ringed by coral reefs and white or black sand beaches (depending on their proximity to volcanoes), it has a mountainous interior with dense lush vegetation and deep gorges, and cascading verdant rice terraces. It lies just south of the equator and is exceptionally





fertile and thanks to its volcanoes and rainfall has extensive agriculture, notably rice, fruit and vegetables. Mount Agung (over 3,000 metres) known as the 'mother mountain' is the highest and is still active. All Hindu homes in Bali have a family temple (its size dependant on the economic status of the family) which is always situated in the corner of the family compound which is closest to Mt Agung. When we were on Lombok, an island about 30 km east of Bali, all vantage points on the west coast had places where the local people would come and watch the sunset over Mt Agung in Bali. Our hotel's beach offered prime viewing!

Bali is a province of Indonesia, home to most of Indonesia's Hindu community and attracts most of Indonesia's tourists. If you arrive by air, you will land near the capital Denpasar, a big city which spills over into adjacent tourist areas like Kuta, Seminyak and Sanur. As I was looking for things for my shop, I spent the first four nights in Seminyak as this is the area with the highest levels of industry, including the wholesalers and retailers supplying the tourism industry. Kuta, in particular, is a very buzzy area which attracts young 'party-people' and surfers to its beaches and clubs.

Since Bali is such a huge tourist mecca, craft and artefacts from Malaysia and Indonesia (Timor, Flores, Java, Sumatra, Lombok) all come to Bali and are distributed to shops in areas like Ubud and Seminyak. The challenge is to find the wholesaler or importer, otherwise prices are outrageously high. One of the things that I was looking for were traditional Indonesian Kris (daggers) which have beautiful distinctive patterns in the metalwork of the blades and lovely patinated hilts and sheaths. One of my attempts to find one of these en route to Ubud involved a long and ultimately fruitless journey to a small backwater where I was assured there was a dealer with beautiful Kris. Clearly



we all have very different ideas of what is beautiful or desirable and prices are nothing short of ludicrous!

It was my first trip to Bali and I was fortunate enough to find Marilyn, an Australian living in Bali who (for a fee), helped me find some great dealers and outlets. In addition to writing for the local paper, she specialises in knowing the best shops at both a wholesale and retail level. She has a great eye and is a great companion in exploring the shops (and restaurants!) retailtherapy@yahoo.com.au. Highly recommended! Given the level of activity in Bali, finding where to start would have been a formidable task to achieve on one's own in a few days. Apart from some fabulous clothes and shoes which I bought for myself, for the shop I found some beautiful tribal containers, an amazing old kris knife at a reasonable price and some other interesting artefacts from some of the other Indonesian Islands like Sumba and Sulawesi. I also ordered some lovely cotton clothes in amazing colours.....

On leaving Seminyak for Ubud, I hired a car (and driver) for the day so that I could explore the small villages and visit various craftsmen and traders en route. One quickly learns that in Bali each area has its own speciality and in Celuk, located just outside Denpasar on route to Ubud there is a high concentration of silver workers. The silver-workers I visited mainly work on orders from designers or retailers and few had much in stock that I could buy. Marilyn took me to see Lou Guerin, a French designer, who combined leather, stingray, bone, silver and gems to produce really beautiful and unusual work and who had some items in stock that I was able to buy. Many European designers (notably French and Italian) have collaborated with skilled Balinese craftsmen to create unique ranges of products. Others, like Guerin, have relocated to Bali permanently as the large tourist industry has created a viable market for their work.



The drive between Denpasar and Ubud is relatively short and built up all the way so you never really leave an urban environment. Ubud, the cultural centre is also densely populated, teeming with activity (and tourists). It has wonderful hotels and restaurants and among the thousands of shops, you will find some selling really exceptional craft, textiles and jewellery (often the result of collaboration between European designers and local craftsmen). One shop had exquisite and very different jewellery, designed by Italian designer Milena Zu, which drew on a traditional Lombok craft where a fine metal 'yarn' is crocheted into a mesh into which gems are incorporated www.milenazu.com. Other shops had beautiful traditional batiks and i-kat textiles, extraordinary huge lacquered bowls with intricately patterned designs, wonderful baskets (I bought a few) and there were also many shops selling 'primitive' artefacts and furniture that I mentioned earlier at scary prices. However, it did have spectacularly good Italian gelati (made by Italian-owned Gaya Fusion which has a ceramic centre, restaurant and small hotel) and a visit became mandatory whenever we were in Ubud. We also sampled the traditional Babi Guling (suckling pig) at the famous Ibu Oka restaurant. I didn't find much to buy in Ubud as most of the goods were sourced from the wholesalers in Seminyak and the prices were correspondingly high and not very negotiable!



We stayed at Taman Harum, a small hotel in Mas, the woodcarving district, located about 8 km outside Ubud on the Denpasar-side. They had about 15 cottages located in a lovely lush garden and a pool overlooking some rice fields. It was a really peaceful, comfortable place whose staff were incredibly warm, welcoming and helpful. Being out of Ubud, they ran a free shuttle service into town and you phoned or gave them a collection time and place.



As we also found in Vietnam, the streets are lined with homes (most of which are also being used for some form of home-industry), shops and restaurants. Behind the houses, and often not visible from the streets, are the rice fields and areas where crops, fruit and vegetables are grown and cattle, pigs, ducks and chickens raised. Cock-fighting (and betting on cock-fights) is a huge industry in Bali and all along the streets, outside homes you will see woven baskets each containing one resplendent (and pampered) cockerel put out to enjoy the sunshine. Apparently the amount of attention that men lavish on their cockerels (who receive special diets and daily massages) can result in strained marital relations! Champion cockerels which fight with sharpened knives attached to their spurs can command high prices and are valuable household assets.

Apart from giant holes in the sidewalks, walking in Bali's busy streets also requires constant attention so that you don't step on one of the shallow woven baskets containing rice, fruit and flowers that are placed on the pavements outside every establishment. These are small offering baskets called 'canang sari' that Balinese offer to their Gods (Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu) three times a day and place at strategic locations around the family home and temple. These offerings are seen as a way of giving back what has been given to you, bringing prosperity and good health to the family and maintaining a good relationship between people and spirits. Offerings are such an important part of daily life in Bali that wherever you look you will find small stalls and shops that provide everything needed.



Another interesting tradition is 'mass cremation'. Only the very rich or royalty can afford the luxury of an individual funeral so once every five years each community will hold a mass cremation where everyone who has died during the interim is cremated – cremation is a rite of passage for Balinese Hindus as it enables the soul to be released from the body so it can be reincarnated. While waiting, bodies are buried in temporary graves and unearthed in time for the ceremony. We witnessed the preparations in one small village where preparations were well under way for a cremation of 34 people to be held at the end of July on a date determined by the Balinese calendar.

All community members work together and share in the expense. Elaborate sarcophagi (wooden frames covered in paper) in the

shape of water-buffalo are constructed and the bodies (or bones) placed within them before being placed on a pyre in the local cemetery. The colour of the paper covering indicates the caste of the deceased (unlike India there is no Untouchable caste). The manufacture of sarcophagi and related funeral regalia is a major industry in Bali and again we found there were areas which specialised in this unique craft.





We decided to catch the fast boat to Lombok which meant spending the night near Padangbai on the east coast (the departure point). We hired a car and driver so we could stop en route and look at local craft and enjoy the beautiful scenery and rice fields in the Sideman Valley. We spent the night at Candidasa and were picked up the next morning and taken to the fast boat ticket office (all part of the fee). At around 9 o'clock about 1500 people converged on the dock as fast boats from around 10 different operators pulled in and loaded bags and

passengers (around 100 passengers per boat). It appeared to be total chaos but it worked and

by 10 o'clock we were on our boat and headed for Lombok. The adverts show lots of happy passengers sitting on the top-deck but conditions were rough that day and everyone was inside. After about an hour we arrived at Lombok where, to our great surprise, we were the only passengers disembarking – everyone else was bound for Gili Trawangan, or Gili T as it is widely referred to (Gili means Island). Since our bags went on first and no-one thought to give us special labels stating destination Lombok, it took about 20 minutes to unearth our bags from the hold! The advantage of the fast boat was that it dropped us about 10 km from our destination. On the way back we flew from Lombok to Denpasar to catch our connecting flight to Bangkok which involved a 90 minute drive to the airport. The fast boat cost around R400 each and the flight around R250 each.



Lombok is an island which is only slightly smaller than Bali and, like the rest of Indonesia, is predominantly Muslim. It is located around 30 km to the east of Bali across the Lombok Strait which separates Bali from Lombok and "marks the bio-geographical division between the fauna of the Indo-malayan ecozone and the distinctly different fauna of Australasia. The transition is known as the Wallace Line, named after Alfred Russel Wallace, who first proposed a transition zone between these two major biomes" (Wikipedia).

On the advice of friends, we stayed at Windy Beach (named for the owner's wife and not for the weather!) just north of Senggigi, the major tourist area of Lombok mainland. Located at the northern end of Mangsitt Beach, it comprised about 15 bungalows set in about 2 hectares of garden along a very lovely and quiet beach where we spent a couple of days just unwinding after the hectic pace of Bali. I spent hours walking on the beach picking up shells - I have never seen so many cowries and lambies in one place and then





there was blue coral just lying washed up on the beach! Our end of the beach had white sand but around 400 metres down it changed to black. There was a coral reef just off the beach but it was somewhat overshadowed by what we saw on the Gilis! Between us and Senggigi, there were several really large resorts, including a Sheraton and we were very pleased to be staying somewhere small and comfortable with a very quiet, relatively private beach. We wanted to explore Lombok, visit the



northern and southern Gilis (wonderful snorkelling) and see if we could track down any of the famed Lombok crafts for my shop so we hired a car for most of the time we were there. Being relatively unpopulated Lombok was an easy place to drive (they also drive on the left like we do in SA) and we quickly learned the local driving habits – a quiet hoot to indicate to others (mainly motorbikes and carts drawn by small, bad-tempered ponies) that you were there before overtaking. As we were about 5 km out of Senggigi and our hotel's food was pretty indifferent, it was great to be able to go to the local restaurants too.



The snorkelling around (the pretty unknown) Gili Nanggu in the south (off Bangko Bangko) and around Gili Air in the north off Bangsal was glorious. We had to catch boats to the islands and then literally walked from



the beach into the sea and onto shallow reefs which were teeming with fish (many of which we had never seen before) and many varieties of coral. There were lots of dive companies and apparently there is some spectacular scuba diving too. The awful practice of hunting sharks for their fins has all but wiped out the shark populations in Indonesia (as it has in Madagascar and many other places in the world). Healthy reefs rely on sharks to maintain the balance between predatory and reef fish so the consequences are likely to be far-reaching.

Although the guidebooks spoke of traditional Lombok craft, notably baskets, pottery, woodwork and textiles, we can only assume that anything worthwhile went to Bali as we never found a single thing worth buying. Every beach has people selling nasty curios, sarongs and pearls, none of which come from Lombok! When we did see the famous Lombok farmed pearls, they were so outrageously over-priced that I didn't buy any. We visited one 'pearl emporium' outside Mataram. It was vast and clearly catered for tour groups and as we were the only customers we had about 50 staff members all desperate to show off their (mainly horrible) wares – most of which came from China and were much cheaper in Joburg!



The sun setting behind Mt Agung 'Mother Mountain' on Bali, from our beach in Mangsitt, Lombok

Lombok is still relatively untouristy but not for long! Gili Trawangan, the notorious 'party island' already attracts lots of young who arrive by fast boats from Bali. The international airport which opened in 2011 in Mataram will bring in surfers to Lombok's Kuta while stylish up-market resorts like Qunci Villas in Senggigi (plus beautiful beaches, snorkelling and diving) will definitely start to offer some stiff competition to Bali (especially for those wanting places which are less touristy). Lombok is not quite as picturesque as Bali. It doesn't have the ornate Hindu architectural tradition and it is drier and less fertile. It does have an exceptionally beautiful coastline, lovely beaches, coral reefs, snorkelling, surfing and diving. It has clearly identified the economic benefits of tourism and is rapidly developing the appropriate infrastructure.

It was great to visit there and I am pleased I have been, but for me Bali is just too touristy and generally overpriced. While they have some phenomenal craftsmen, as a buying destination it just did not excite me like India and the Himalayas or even Cambodia or Laos. And it is just so faaar!

Do visit us and enjoy some of the spoils of this (and other) trips: furniture, doors, bedcovers, clothing and jewellery.

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