



INDONESIA

BALI

I started travelling in November and didn't know much about Indonesia, only that it consists of numerous islands in the Indian Ocean and that the capital city is Jakarta. On my way there I had an eleven-hours-stopover in Singapore, probably the cleanest city in the world. Being confronted by signs that told about the penalty fees for eating or drinking, smoking, skating or any other enjoyable action, I was more than happy that I didn't have to stay there!



Naturally I had heard people talking about the beauty of Bali and its interesting, mostly Hindu culture. But I knew nothing about any other island and was surprised to learn that all islands together cover an area of 1, 9 million km²! In total, Indonesia has a population of about 235 million people.

Arriving in Kuta, Bali's most touristy area, I didn't find the sunny island I had expected. Instead, it was raining heavily and I doubted if I was prepared well enough. Of course, during the dry season between May and October the climate is hot, humid and tropical but I

had just entered the wet season that would probably last longer than I intended to stay, bringing heavy monsoon like rainfalls and storms for the next 6 months. At least there weren't many tourists around.

After leaving Kuta I spent some days in a village famous for its art and handicrafts. There I lived in a so-called "losmen", a typical Bali style house which looked like a small temple. Every morning I breakfasted on fruit salad made of bananas, paw paws, passion fruit and pineapples and had coffee with very thick, sweetened milk, "kopi susu".

Bali's main religion is Hinduism and I was impressed by the peaceful and respectful way the Balinese lived with each other. Apparently most families had a kind of shrine where they sacrificed small goods to their gods every day. After praying they put a flower behind their ears and there was the smell of incense sticks and sounds of gongs and light music everywhere. Exploring the area around the village I saw green rice terraces, coconut plantations and farmers with water buffalos, working without any help of modern techniques or equipment.

Of course it wasn't that peaceful everywhere, as soon as I went to crowded places like a market I learned to bargain and fight for my word. Communicating wasn't hard at all because English is widely spoken and understood in the touristy areas. There are more than 250 regional dialects in Indonesia, but the official language is the "Bahasa Indonesia", a surprisingly easy language with practically no grammar. For a long time the Dutch had colonies in Indonesia and they traded with spices. That's why the Bahasa is also influenced by Dutch and some words sounded quite familiar. I started writing down the most important phrases and surprised some locals by talking to them in their language. After a few days in Bali I felt relaxed and ready for adventure and headed east to an island called Lombok.

LOMBOK



Arriving at night time and in darkness my first impression was that Lombok was totally different from Bali. During the short bus ride to the nearest town I saw huge, illuminated mosques where hundreds of people were gathering and praying. The bus dropped me off at a very busy night market and I found it quite amazing how many people there were, buying food, drinking and eating. It all had a simple explanation: Lombok's main religion is Islam and I was travelling during Ramadan, the period of fasting when the Muslims don't eat or drink during the day. As soon as the sun sets they're allowed to break the fasting and eat as much as possible to get through the next day.

At daytime only few shops opened, so sometimes even I had to fast involuntarily.



Of course I tried to respect the rules of the Islam by wearing only shirts and pants with long sleeves. But still, sometimes people insulted me for eating during the day, walking in the streets without male company, being western and travelling alone or whatever reasons.



My main mission in Lombok was to climb the volcano Rinjani and that turned out to be quite a challenge. Although the locals tried to convince me to hire a guide and a porter I decided to make my way to the top without any help, carrying a backpack with 10 litres of water, a tent and food. But first of all I wanted to prove myself and secondly knew that the guides would fast even despite the enduring hike and I didn't want to be responsible for any kind of accident. The interesting thing about hiking in tropical climate was that I started in the warm, humid rainforest. Accompanied by monkeys, wild dogs, lizards and geckos, I fought my way through dense jungle, finding mangos, bananas or pineapples growing in the wilderness. At least once a day I had to hide under a shelter for one or two hours to

be protected from the heavy rain that poured down. Finally I left the forest behind and entered an area of totally different vegetation: instead of tropical plants I found alpine vegetation, conifer trees, small bush, rocks and even Edelweiß! Also it was quite windy and much colder.

What made the hike really challenging was that first the path led up to the rim of the crater and then down into it. At the bottom there was a crater lake with another, much smaller volcano in the middle that arose some years ago when the volcano exploded again. I took a refreshing bath in the very chilly water and tried to warm up again in some natural hot springs nearby, then continued my way and climbed up to the opposite side of the rim again that rose to the peak at 3776 metres. At night time I met three other hikers at a camp and put up my tent. After some hours of sleep we left the camp together to fight the last bit of way to the top, which was very tiring. The temperatures were around zero, the wind was blowing and my shoes didn't get any grip on the gravel and ash path. Finally when the sun was already rising, we reached the top and enjoyed a stunning view of the crater, the mountains around us and even saw some neighbouring islands in the distance. Returning from the trip to the volcano, I relaxed on the beach of a small island called "Gili Air". It's so tiny you can take a walk along the water and return to the starting point within half an hour! Then we travelled further east to an island called Flores.

FLORES

On this beautiful but calm island I found many different attractions but no big hotel resorts and mass tourism like in Bali. Most people in Flores were Christians, but luckily the coexistence with other religions seemed to work well, which made travelling relatively safe and easy.

Leaving the ferry at the port of Labuan Bajo, this village wasn't impressive at first sight. On the contrary, I even felt intimidated being awaited by some "freelancers", people who tried very hard to sell me a room in a certain hotel in order to receive a tip from the owner. Tipping usually changed them back into the most laid-back guys. I followed the calmest of them and made a good choice. By the way, being relaxed is something very essential in a country like Indonesia! There is absolutely nothing to stress or worry about, things happen anyway and everything has its time. This attitude is called "jam karet", "rubber – time".

The inhabitants of Labuan Bajo seemed very friendly and helpful and the food was great. My hotel was on a hill and watching the sun set into the sea while eating "nasi goreng", the national meal made of fried rice made me want to stay longer.

The area revealed its real beauty under water: Just offshore there were plenty coral reefs along the coast and snorkelling and diving became an unforgettable experience.

Labuan Bajo also is the "entrance" to the islands of "Komodo National Park". Komodo and Rinca Island are famous for their Komodo dragons, big impressive lizards. I was impressed by the exciting wildlife because apart from the dragons I encountered monkeys, buffalos, deer and big birds. The climate was dry and the ground covered by bush and rocks, which gave the dragons a good camouflage. Realizing that what I had thought was a rock in reality was a dragon was exciting, not only because some of them had an impressive body length of three metres. Also, their spittle is venomous and they use their tail as a weapon. Although they look rather heavy and slow, they are good hunters and don't have any trouble killing a buffalo. Of course, I had to listen to some horror stories about tourists who had been lost and all the dragons had left over was their camera...



Anyway, I survived unharmed and witnessed some celebrations that were going on in Labuan Bajo. The Muslims were celebrating the end of Ramadan and invited everybody to visit their homes and party with them. The wives, who had been preparing food over several weeks, served heaps of delicious food, cookies, drinks and cigarettes and there were dances and music and feasts everywhere.

I decided to travel on and be back for Christmas because I was told that for that occasion the Christians would re invite their Muslim friends and I was looking forward to some more buffets. The public transport system in Indonesia is very basic but effective: minibuses, so - called "bemos", travel all over the islands and take as many passengers as would fit in the bus and on the roof. They don't follow a schedule but leave when the last seat is taken. My next stop was a mountain village called "Bajawa", probably less than two hundred kilometres away but it took a day's ride to get there. The narrow roads were not always paved, and gravel roads seemed a bit challenging for the bemo which was in rather poor condition. Anyway, travelling through the rainforest, winding up the hilly ways, crossing mountain ridges, meeting wild animals such as monkeys and buffalos while listening to Indonesian chart music at full volume was a unique experience that I don't want to miss. Finally I arrived in Bajawa and enjoyed one of its best and at the same time most relaxing attractions: a beautiful, somehow enchanted park with hot springs. Sitting in a hot pool, listening to the gurgling sound of the water, being serenaded by the playing of a local guitarist who had come by to relax was like getting a glimpse of what Garden Eden could be like!



Less famous but for me even more unique and impressive were the “Red lakes”, born only recently and known by hardly any tourists. Some years ago, the eruption of a volcano made the ground blast and the wholes in the ground filled with rain water during the wet season. Due to chemical reactions in the ground the water turned red.

Finally I arrived at the probably most famous place in Flores, a volcano called “Kelimutu” which has three crater lakes of different colours! The colours don’t stay the way they are: as the years go by, the minerals in the lakes change slowly and that makes the colours change as well. When I was there, they were turquoise, chocolate brown and black.



Finally I returned to my losmen in Labuan Bajo for the Christmas parties. Together with the staff I attended the mass and saw that everybody had changed their flip flops for “real” shoes and were wearing only the best clothes. I didn’t understand any word of the ceremony, only recognized “Silent night, holy night” which was sung in Bahasa. After 2 hours we left the church as it was impossible to estimate for how many hours more the priest was going to pray. Back at the hotel, we wished each other a Merry Christmas or “selamat natal”, as they say and had a great dinner with different meals made of meat and seafood, rice and exotic fruit. Meanwhile, at an outside temperature of about 30°C, the radio was playing “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas”, and I was thinking what would happen if that dream came true...

Questions on the text

- How is a house of typical Balinese style called?
- How many regional dialects are there to be found in Indonesia?
- What religion do most people in Flores belong to?
- Why does the volcano Kelimutu have three crater lakes of different colours?
- In which language do you say “selamat natal” and what does it mean?

Discussion Topics

In Indonesia people with different religious confessions live closely next to each other. This creates a very multicultural atmosphere but runs not always as peacefully as it could/should. Think about Austria: what are the main religions and do they have a very strong impact on the Austrian society?

“Jam Karet – Take it easy” is an attitude that is very common in Indonesia. Do you think that Jam Karet would work in the western world too? Why or why not?

Essay writing

In the last months Indonesia had to cope with several natural disasters. The Tsunami at the end of December 2004 was followed by more earth and sea quakes. Thousands of children lost their mother or father or both. Although organisations from all over the world are trying to help the situation especially in Sumatra is very serious. Imagine you were in charge of organizing the reconstruction and had the means to help. Where would you start? What is there to be done anyway?