

# CULTURE SHOCK BALI

*Volcanic Sunrises, Nyepi Festival & other Tourist Oddities*

Just before my departure for Bali, Indonesia, I'm informed of two things:

- 1) I will be flying into Bali just before midnight on Indonesian New Year's Eve.
- 2) This Balinese holiday of Nyepi means that everything shuts down, electricity is banned and it is punishable to walk the city streets after a certain time.

Information like this is always a reassuring pat on the back as you're heading to the airport for a trip to foreign lands...

So, I board the last airplane going to the central Indonesian island of Bali. Exiting the plane, the heavy humidity hits me like a wet, incense-scented sponge slapping me across the face. Due to the Nyepi holiday, I won't be able to escape staying less than two nights in Kuta (the discarded resort and club-lined residue of what was once a traveller's gem (or so I hear)...in the 1970s. With almost all people (including taxi drivers) already locked into the darkness of their homes for the next 36 hours, I grudgingly pay four times the 'max price' previously advised from the airport to Kuta Beach.

I am dropped off to what I assume is the front of my hostel, but which is actually a labyrinth of back alleys lined with Hindu shrine offerings. Far too narrow for a car to fit through. With all electricity cut off and the city void of life (a rare experience in Kuta), I drag my way through a foot of stagnant water in the heavy night rain, cursing my beloved

guitar  
for being  
my necessary travel  
companion.

After an hour of soaked stumbling and backtracking, I manage to come across the delightful sound of several English-speaking foreigners enjoying cold Bintangs behind the front of my sign-less hostel. Ah, English: the comfort of familiarity that we all yearn to leave, yet immediately pine for when we veer too treacherously into the depths of the unknown. I sit with the group awhile, and together, we enjoy the customary swap of traveller stories – that include their experiences amidst the parade of Balinese Ogoh Ogoh monsters during that day's New Year celebrations.

I'm intrigued. Apparently, the Ogoh Ogoh monsters are the personification of Bali's underworld. These long nailed, sharp-toothed, grotesque creatures are evil spirits which can never be destroyed, only appeased, if people give them enough respect and plenty of offerings in the form of food, flowers, incense and festivals. In the Nyepi celebration, the idea is almost to give the gargoyle-like creatures an 'outing' and so balance the distance between good and evil.

*The Ogoh Ogoh Monsters*







As it turns out, this would be our last conversation. The following day, religious police armed with machetes would threaten us for speaking and thus not honouring their Nyepi day of silence.

Hence, the rest of that day passes in contented (albeit forced) solitude via yoga, meditation – and of course – the odd clandestine whispers about why Western countries would never be capable of implementing such a peaceful national holiday. The thought of Catholic priests wearing funky hats and carrying machetes whilst marching around monitoring Christmas doesn't quite capture the same cultural significance (although there's no doubt it would make an interesting video game)...

The following day, the silence is broken by congestion, crowds, and catcalls for taxis. Kuta won't be quiet again until next year's Nyepi. Before leaving, I consider renting a surfboard to catch some of Bali's notorious waves, but figure the lineup is just way too full. I fhe surf is best saved for the south of Lombok, Bali's little brother island to the east. So, with that in mind, I rent a motorbike (for the outstanding daily rate of 30,000 rupiah - \$3 CAD) - and prepare to head north towards the island's two active volcanoes.

Breathing the smells of sweet incense, fried tempeh and feral chickens, I fill up my motorbike with petrol from one of the many roadside warungs (convenience / food shops). I find it ironic that in Indonesia, they store gas in Absolut Vodka bottles – and yet in restaurants, they serve local wine from what appears to be a 4-litre petrol container. Either way it helps explain why they both taste the same.

When my alarm goes off at 2am, I not only have no clue as to where I am, but also forget the fact I signed up for the 'sunrise volcano hike' the night before. Mount Batur is located four hours north of Kuta, and includes a pitch black 4km trek before reaching the summit in time for sunrise.

As our crew (mainly Canadians) and guides reach the top, the darkness begins to fade, showing us the mass of clouds that

blanket our hopes of seeing anything at all, let alone the panoramic sunrise. Being a group of Canadians, we refrain from complaining and naturally switch the topic to hockey. When our guides serve us our complimentary hard boiled 'volcano eggs', the clouds part just in time to catch the orange ball rising and outlining the surrounding Bali mountain line. I take the moment to be thankful my alarm clock does not have a snooze button.

Volcanic Monkeys live in the warm crater and know when the feeding hands of tourists arrive. The road from Mount Batur to Ubud – Bali's cultural hotbed – passes through colourful montages of fruit warungs, phenomenal rice terraces chiseled into the mountain, and leftover Ogoh Ogoh monsters that were not burnt following the Nyepi day of silence and rest. Ignoring my map (which is often my choice, since Bali is pretty inefficient at posting street signs), I take the back roads, passing smiling villagers wearing their bright sarongs as they light their incense and consciously place their routine shrine offerings up to the gods for luck.

I pull over to the side of the road to watch a young local fly a kite from within his rice paddy playground, when I look over to see giant Hollywood lettering stating 'Not For Sale'. A haunting theme that sticks with me as I process the tourist influx over the decades that has provided both financial backing and burden to this small island, its people and culture.

Whichever way you arrive into Ubud, it will be via one of the many busy roads dense with endless art houses, stone masons or massage shops. Ubud definitely has a different energy and modern bohemian twist amidst the ancient Indonesian village remnants. There are more yoga studios, fashion boutiques and organic cafes than the trendiest district of any major North American city. Fortunately, though, all it takes to escape the expats and woman clinging on to their copy of Eat Pray Love is to slip off the busy main street.

Looking for my homestay, I disappear into a labyrinth of mossy tiles, stonework and sculpture guardians that instantly warp you in to a different time and place. Behind the inner city walls lay the quiet and original Ubud village: slow farmers tending to open rice paddies with structures and lifestyles that have not changed a jot over the centuries.

There is a medium class 'resort' visible from my second floor homestay terrace. I see one Westerner using his WIFI as he eats breakfast, while another sips a cocktail next to a beautiful pool that cuts off directly into the area's rice paddy that two local farmers have been harvesting by hand since sunrise. This baffles me. And yet here I am as well, with a camera in my hand, documenting this direct cultural barrier of a brick wall separating a rice paddy and a pool of luxury.

We, the Westerner, love experiencing 'culture' – but often from a comfortable distance. And yet the Balinese people still smile at us throughout. Why? If some foreigner came peering into my yard, scotch in hand, taking pictures of me roto-tiling my garden at home,



I would tell him to help out or buzz off. Maybe I should start lighting more incense as an offering to the gods of happiness..?

Bali is a lot of things to a lot of people, and has been for decades. Whether you are searching for beaches, surf, eco-tourism, culture, spiritual enlightenment, or simply that photo of someone living a different life from your own, Bali is a one-stop island. Plans are underway to rebuild Denpasar, the island's international airport, which will reportedly extend its annual 4.5 million tourists to 20 million. This will make those amazing discoveries a little more strained to find. Which brings me back to my first impressions on arrival: Whether Bali's infrastructure, people, or culture are ready for further masses, or not? Either way, I'm guessing that Nyepi day of silence will soon be more important than ever.



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# NYEPI

## WHAT: The Balinese Hindu New Year

## WHEN: 27th March 2013

The Hindu Nyepi Day (where the population is over 90% Hindu) is calculated according to the Balinese Saka Calendar and falls on the first new moon after mid-March. In 2013, this will be Wednesday, 27th March. In a somewhat stark contrast to the traditional New Year's Eve parties in Western culture, Nyepi is also known as the Day of Silence. It is a time to spend in a reflective zone - sleeping, meditating, reading - at home or in your hotel. If you're seen wandering the streets (and rather fruitlessly, we might add, considering that absolutely nothing will be open!) you will be politely, but firmly taken back to your quarters by Pecalang, or traditional Balinese security men.

But there's more to Nyepi than just being quiet...

### THREE DAYS BEFORE NYEPI

MELASTI, MEKIYIS, MELIS  
(THE COLOURFUL CEREMONIES MARCH)

A cleansing rite, one of the purposes of Melasti is to bathe all the effigies of gods from the temples in natural water (and therefore the Balinese Neptune, the God Baruna). The march to the ocean, lake or river is both long and colourful, and once there, the gods are ceremonially bathed before being taken back home to their shrines and temples.

### ONE DAY BEFORE NYEPI

NEW YEAR'S EVE - TAWUR KESANGA

This is when most of the action takes place! Also known as the 'Day of Great Sacrifices', all the villagers dressed in traditional costume come together in the town centres for a kind of mass exorcism rite (with Denpasar staging the grandest procession!). This is a day full of colour, excitement, party vibes, and that all-important Balinese carnivalesque atmosphere. Accompanied by a type of traditional

gamelan music called Bleganjur that's typical to the island. Home-made monsters made of bamboo called Ogoh-ogoh are paraded about in a bid to ward off evil spirits, or Bhuta Kala. They are then hoisted up on sticks, offered gifts of food and flowers, and then burnt in a huge, exorcism; a completely riotous bonfire of a ceremony! Curfew alert! Make sure you're back in your hotel by 6am at the very latest.

### NYEPI DAY

NEW YEAR'S DAY

Following the revelries of the night before, this will no doubt be the most hush-hush New Year's Day you'll have ever experienced - so make sure you enjoy it - as one thing's for sure, this will absolutely be the only completely peaceful one you'll ever experience on this hectic island (save for dogs barking and insects humming... yes, it really is that quiet!).

Now all evil has been successfully warded off, Nyepi is the day for the Balinese to demonstrate their new-found self-control. There'll be absolutely no traffic outside - motorised or pedestrian (even the airport will be closed!). Stay inside, don't work, talk, drink alcohol, cook, or light fires, and keep the TV and radio down low, as well as all the lights. (Oh and don't let that last one put you in a romantic mood, though, because that's not allowed either!)

### THE DAY AFTER NYEPI

NGEMBAK GENTI

As of 6am, the Hindus of Bali traditionally forgive each other via an array of activities that form part of the Dharma Canthi. These include reading ancient scripts and singing ancient songs - namely, Sloka, Kekidung, Kekawin and others.

