

INDONESIA TRAVEL JOURNAL – Continued

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BALI

22-23 June; 1 July, 2014

I arrived in Kuta Beach, Bali via a fairly smooth 1.5 hr. ride on a Boeing 737. The landing was about the only memorable event; sudden, hard and loud. Kids screamed, adults gasped. Short runway, I suppose. A taxi (\$6) from the airport seemed like the best alternative. No public transportation was in sight. As soon as I announced to the cab driver my intended destination, he just stared at me, my two big bags (together weighing about 85 lbs.), mumbled something in Bahasa Indonesia, and proceeded to load up and drive us directly into a massive mid-afternoon traffic jam. Welcome to Bali, Angelinos.

Along the way to the hotel we passed through the capital city of Denpasar. Eventually we were on the main drag of Kuta Beach. Thirty-some years ago, the area was practically undeveloped yet buzzing with locals driving three and four-wheeled taxis, hand-pulled buggies, women washing clothes in streams; people carrying bamboo and sacks of rice on bicycles etc., typical of small towns and villages throughout Indonesia today. Kuta Beach ain't that anymore. Although a few traditional sidewalk food stalls remain, flashy Suzukis, Hondas, Toyotas and other contemporary forms of transport crowd streets lined with five-star hotels, fast-food restaurants (e.g. Wendy's, Burger King, Starbucks and the omnipresent MacDonald's). All of the fast food places were packed with Indonesians, together with a few Westerners; most of the latter dressed in sandals, shorts and tank-top. Imagine an Indonesian invasion of Miami Beach Florida and you are close to appreciating the current scene in Kuta Beach, Bali.



I arrived in Bali without a hotel reservation. Not a big deal here, since there are hundreds of places to stay in and around Kuta Beach. But it is high season and I was a little worried my first hotel choice (based on reviews in my copy of the Lonely Planet guide book to Indonesia), would be full. There was an information desk near the baggage claim but I couldn't get any help from them. I spotted a group of youngsters dressed in airport uniforms and talking on cell phones. They cheerfully agreed to help me. I followed one of them into a back room office with several other people, including a woman dressed in full Muslim regalia, sitting on the floor eating a meal with her hands. Someone dialed the phone number I gave them for the Bali Bungalow Hotel and I quickly obtained a last-minute room reservation from a friendly hotel manager with a British- Indian accent.

My room was on the second floor with a view of a courtyard and swimming pool. The room was relatively large, decorated with artwork on the walls, clean and comfortable. There was also desk with an overhead light and a non-functional electrical outlet.

The internationally franchised Hard Rock Café, Kuta Beach Bali 22 June 2014



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Early morning on Kuta Beach, Bali 23 June 2014



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Electrical outlets throughout Indonesia appear to be a standard two-prong affair similar to the ones in the US, but the prongs are cylindrical instead of flattened. I always pack a few 110 to 240 v adaptors in good condition. But hotel electrical outlets wear out and everywhere I have stayed in Indonesia, the outlets were rather loose fitting. Even when an adaptor fits the outlet, the electric current may not flow evenly from it. The result can be electrifying, as I discovered at the National Park lodging in Toraut. We are talking 240 volts up the side of the arm to the spine, then straight to all knee-jerk-type reflexes my central nervous system has available. There are many of these built-in reflexes in our body. When even a few are triggered, what follows resembles a mild epileptic seizure. Fortunately, there was another functional outlet next to my bed, so I didn't have to mess around and end up partially paralyzed on the floor again.

It was nearly dark when I arrived, so I couldn't yet see the beach, which was blocked from view by a large temple wall along the main street. The following morning I grabbed my binocular and camera and set out to see if there might be anything on the beach that would stir up fond memories of my visit to Bali in the late 1970's. Indeed, there was something. As the dawn light scattered through a row of palms and lit up parts of the beach, about a dozen surfers were working a huge, ball-busting, swimsuit-ripping shore break.

Surfing was just gaining popularity here in the 1970's. Kuta beach, along with several other outstanding breaks, now attracts world-class surfers as well as beginners. I recall a few tumbles in the powerful surf here and meeting locals who watched my comical attempts to surf with interest. Some youngsters wanted to learn the sport but couldn't afford to rent a board. One was a Javanese girl about 18 years old, who was vacationing in Bali with her family. She asked me to show her the basics of surfing, which I gleefully did, even though I was a beginner at the time and practically over my head with the waves at Kuta Beach. Her name was Diana. She loved the water and appeared to be a competent swimmer. In no time, she had learned to stand up on the board, at least momentarily. The breaks at Kuta can be unforgiving, yet Diana was determined to master the sport.

About a year later, while I was teaching at the National University in Kuala Lumpur, I received a letter from Diana's friend in Jakarta. Her tenderly chosen words, in mostly broken English, hit me hard. It was one of those unforgettable letters, initially read with disbelief, followed by overwhelming sadness. Diana had drowned two months earlier at Kuta Beach in a surfing accident. All I could picture was her lovely young, smiling face, gone forever.

This morning, a bunch of young girls clad in modest Muslim scarves and dresses, exchanged smiles and photos on the beach. I managed to capture a couple of candid images. Everyone seemed to be celebrating life. Later, as I sat sipping a freshly opened coconut, two of them approached and politely asked in English if they could obtain photos of me next to them. I remained comfortably seated in my plastic lounge chair as they took turns with their cell phone

camera. I have no idea why they thought that sort of image was meaningful, but I enjoyed a moment of celebrity status, nonetheless.

BALI – continued

Bali Botanical Garden 1 July 2014



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July 1, 2014

It was a smooth flight from Labuanbajo, Flores to Denpasar, Bali, on a French-made twin prop AR-600. All eighty of the seats were taken this time. One of the last passengers to board turned out to be Jan, a Belgian dive instructor and underwater photographer I had met a few days earlier in Labuanbajo. I didn't recognize him wearing a hat, but his low-pitched voice and accent sounded familiar. Beside him was another young man whom I had not met, with a tripod and backpack as carry-on. I caught only fragments of their conversation one row of seats ahead of me. It was clear that the unidentified chap was a birder, who was showing Jan some of his videos he made recently while visiting Indonesia.

When the flight landed, Jan said hello to me. The three of us headed through the airport to the fast-food stalls outside. I introduced myself to Jan's companion (whom he had just met on our flight here). The young Dutchman's name was Yoel, though it sounded like he said "Joel." He had an Academy Award winning smile and GQ good looks, yet was soft spoken and a careful listener. Yoel's English was excellent and we had no trouble exchanging ideas, particularly regarding the most sought-after birds of Indonesia.

When birders meet, usually no matter where or under what circumstances, there is cause for celebration. All three of us were hungry (no food whatever was served on the flight to Bali); Jan spotted a Burger King and that seemed almost perfect. None of us had eaten American junk food for a long time, so despite an obvious risk to our health (Yoel had seen Morgan Spurlock's documentary, Supersize Me), we dove on it.

We ate like someone might suddenly take the food away, finishing our meal in less than five minutes, while keeping an eye on our bags. Logistics and travel itineraries dominated the conversation. Jan interjected some humor regarding one of his female dive students, who, he said "Looked better wearing a scuba mask than she did without one." Yoel didn't yet have a hotel room on Bali; Jan was staying with friends up the coast not far from Kuta Beach. He had to renew his visa in order to continue working on Flores. We bade farewell to Jan as he headed toward a taxi stand.

Yoel was keen to do some birding on Bali the following morning and asked if I was interested in joining him. What great luck! I had no plans for the one-day layover in Bali, except perhaps for a little last-minute shopping before returning home via Jakarta and Singapore. We decided a trip to the Bali Botanical Garden and local mangroves near the airport were the most reasonable options. Yoel accepted my offer to stay in the Bali Bungalow hotel, Kuta Beach with a fairly spacious room and two single beds. Both of us probably snored from travel fatigue, but Yoel's snoring, I informed him the following day, was almost certainly louder than mine.

Yoel Jimenez Bali Botanical Garden 1 July 2014



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Yoel and I were ready for a day of birding beginning at 4 AM, having pre-arranged a car and driver to meet us at the hotel. The driver, a short-statured, happy-faced Balinese man, arrived a few minutes before 6 AM, obviously on Bali time. He apparently had overslept.

With Mr. Happy at the wheel, we proceeded directly from Kuta Beach to the Bali Botanical Garden, arriving at 7:30 AM. The garden includes several acres of hillside rainforest with paved roads and slightly overgrown trails. There were also large areas with temples, lawns and ornamental plantings. For the first two hours, the only other folks in the garden were groundskeepers, mostly appearing to be on siesta.

Map of the Bali Botanic Garden showing forested and open areas. 1 July 2014



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The garden and temples were meditatively quiet. A flock of Gray-cheeked Green Pigeons was feeding on small yellow fruits in the canopy of a tall fruiting tree. Small, busy flocks of Javan Gray-throated White-Eye (actually a misnamed "Dark Eye") were at similar heights and also difficult to see and photograph. Both were lifers for me but not for Yoel, who had seen them in the highlands of Java.

Javan Grey-throated White-Eye Bali Botanical Garden 1 July 2014



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Yoel and I debated the identity of a small, brownish-gray flycatcher sallying from low branches to the ground (Later that evening, we reviewed Yoel's video and determined that the mystery bird was a Fulvous-chested Jungle Flycatcher.) Soon after we found the jungle flycatcher, I spotted a pair of highly vocal Indonesian Honeyeater (a close relative of the Brown Honeyeater, I had found on Flores), foraging on plantings of red bottle-bush. Four life birds for me thus far. Not bad!



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Our next location was a government-protected mangrove area near the Denpasar airport. This turned out to be quite productive for us. A dilapidated boardwalk connected the parking area with open water adjacent to a new freeway bridge between the lower Bali peninsula and Denpasar. We proceeded slowly, sidestepping sections of rotten and/or missing planks. The old boardwalk was only access to the mangrove except by boat. Numerous Indonesian visitors passed us, some curious as to our objectives, most not. I don't know why any of them bothered to come here. The midday sun and humidity were intense and there appeared to be little of interest for them, aside from friendly chit-chat.

Among the life-birds I found here was the gorgeous Little Blue Kingfisher, which was sallying from a cluster of seedling mangrove trees to the muddy tidal flats below. Its bright aquamarine color compensated for its diminutive size by contrasting sharply with the dull brown and green background.

Little Blue Kingfisher Bali Mangroves 1 July 2014



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The mangrove also held several other bird species that were new to my Bali list (e.g. Rainbow Bee-eater, Sunda Woodpecker, White-shouldered Triller); most were heard first but seen only briefly as they flitted through the canopy. A very cooperative Sacred Kingfisher allowed Yoel time to set up his tripod and capture video, while I snapped a few stills. A single Little Pied Cormorant, the only one either of us had seen anywhere while visiting Indonesia, made a rapid, low flight over across open water near the freeway overpass.

Sacred Kingfisher Bali Mangrove Preserve 1 July 20



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Our final birding stop for the day would be the Nusa Dua coastline not far from Denpasar. We were lost trying to find the place and ended up at the entrance of an exclusive country club. As we exited the vehicle with our camera gear, a guard at the gate approached to inform us that we would not be allowed on the premises. Reason: my camera was too big! Apa ini? (What is this?). He was dead serious and advised us to proceed to a public entrance located a few miles away. The three of us some good laughs while making fun of the arbitrary rule (e.g. "I'm sorry sir, that bulge in your pants is rather too large and you will have to leave.") and eventually found another way to the Nusa Dua coastline.

The parking entrance adjacent to the Nusa Dua public restaurant and recreational facility afforded clear, though distant views of the cliffs and shoreline. Yoel and I sought different pathways along the cliffs. I found a narrow, trash-strewn route through a small canyon pass that was blocked by people involved in a commercial photo-shoot on the picturesque beach. After a brief search for alternate routes, we ended up back at the parking area.

A couple of Reef Herons flew by, followed by a Collared Kingfisher, which had found foraging opportunities in the reef tide pools. Just as we were about to give up and call it a day, Yoel spotted a Frigatebird flying overhead. That was also the first one of its kind either of us had seen in Indonesia; I snapped a few quick shots, alternating with observations fleeting images through my binocular. The bird was an immature, so its identity was uncertain until my photos could closely examined on the computer screen and compared with illustrations in our field guide. Subsequently, I was fairly certain this was a Christmas Island Frigatebird, based on the large black breast band and posterior extent of white on the belly. If so, it was another life-bird for me.

A Presumed Christmas Island Frigatebird (immature) Nusa Dua, Bali 1 July 2014



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The Frigatebird sighting was an auspicious ending to our last day of birding on Bali. Both of us were flying home the next day. Yoel mentioned that he might have a brief opportunity to bird Jakarta Bay before his flight back to the Netherlands. We celebrated that night by indulging in another hamburger-french fry fiesta at the Hard Rock Café in Kuta Beach.

By contrast, my time was limited to scrambling to find a hotel room the next afternoon in Singapore. Indeed, I almost missed my 6:00 AM flight to Los Angeles via Tokyo the following day. That was a two-part action-comedy sequence. The Sandpiper Hotel in Singapore had no record of my reservation (made in person the day I left for Manado) and I ended up once again down the street in the popular Hotel 81. But the friendly staff of Hotel 81 forgot my wake-up call the next morning at 3:30 AM. Fortunately, for some reason, I awoke from a deep sleep at 3:45 AM and eventually arrived at the airport with about twenty minutes to spare. I was home with all my luggage by 2 PM the same day, having re-crossed the IDL and recaptured the day lost on the outgoing journey. Time for reflection and a few more journal entries. Indonesia was truly awesome and definitely worthy of another visit, possibly with my Tropical Biology class. More about that topic when I catch up on sleep.

