

# Enchanted

*May 29 – June 5, 2004*



~ Lai ~

Each journey begins somewhere and the one to the Island of Gods originated from Katmandu. Had Nepal not been in the midst of a raining season as well as a political upheaval, Bali would not have reigned over the impromptu priority list. Words of wisdom were reconfirmed: a work of genius cannot be planned.

Rather late than never, the Boeing 737 descended into Denpasar with the ambiance and nonchalance afforded only on tropical islands. A simple wave at Immigrations removed the last barrier to what turned out to be a rejuvenating week embellished with exhilarating adventures and spectacular sceneries.

The fluty chirping of grey island birds perched on swaying coconut branches in chorus with the gutsy ribbiting of emerald frogs squatting on dewy lily pads halted the drizzle and concocted patches of sunshine from behind the clouds for the arrival of the first morning in Ubud. Whiffs of musk and cinnamon rose from ornate leaf offering holders that dotted the establishment, soothing even the inner most senses. The occasional toffee coloured lizards sailing across the veranda of the thatched bungalow were the only intruders of this blissful tranquility.



A leisurely stroll through town involved stepping into jewelry shops, stopping by local temples, watching monkeys expertly peel bananas, all the while avoiding eye contact with strait dogs that dozed, itched and cruised in the middle of the narrow village streets. When large and heavy raindrops started to fall in the early afternoon, a massage parlor seemed to be the perfect asylum. Relaxing weightless into the void of the cushioned bed, the masseuse's calm hands glided with aromatic massage oil and quieted each shred of muscle. Before long, all noise was drowned and washed away in the downpour outside.

After a quick bite at a random roadside eatery featuring chicken with curry or curry with chicken, it was time for a taste of the world renowned Balinese dance. Actually, dancing really was not the most appropriate description since the performers hooted, stamped feet, rolled eyes and rotated wrists rather than twirled or swirled. The audience was visibly perked when leaves and branches were piled in the center of the stage in preparation for the fire dance. When flames soared, they roasted the damp spirits shivering in the evening drizzle and wind.



Kuta beach waited patiently at doorstep where an orange-bodied dragonfly tanned its delicate wings in the morning sun. After an hour of rickety mountain drive due south, white sand and turquoise water came into view, along with streams of wandering tourists in assorted beachwear. Nesting comfortably on a sarong, waves flapped and people murmured, both at a safe distance. And for the hundredth and last time, “no, it is not necessary to get a temporary tattoo”, especially when the sample folder was blocking the sun, however intricate the designs appeared.

The smell of ocean, the warmth of sunshine, the rustle of branches, the... why was there a siren? Could this be real? Reaching glacially and achingly, fingers fumbling aimlessly across the surface, a possessed cell phone vibrated and pealed to life on the nightstand. Two o'clock, ante meridiem!

Zombified, a white Jimmy tore out of the driveway towards Mount Batur in search of the reputedly most spectacular sunrise the island has to offer, some sanity too. Treacherous was definitely an understatement of what the meandering mountain roads revealed themselves to be for the next two hours. Lethargy inspired courage, stupidity propagated determination, perplexity spawned clarity. Under those ideal conditions alone was the journey continued with directions from a hand drawn map. Where the mud road ended abruptly with the map but the mountain still at a formidable distance, a guide, who was performing stunts straight out of Urban Legend, was hired for the lack of anything else breathing in sight, albeit reluctantly.



Armed with a tank, beach pants, flip-flops and a flash light ascended the unsuspecting souls. After a few strong gust of wind, the guide was generous enough to hand over his sarong wrap followed by his sweater while he billowed in a t-shirt. Flip-flops were not the most fitting choice of footwear either for they allowed lava sand to be caught between toes and had a habit of escaping. Heaving and in enormous pain, will to continue shrank as feet swelled. What was there to be done other than switching shoes with the guide? The ensemble was the epitome of haute couture!

1,756 meters up, orange and periwinkle shone in juxtaposition with teal as fluffy white clouds parted for the blushing sun rising in the distance. Every drop of sweat, labourious step, painful slip was worth the sight.



Strange as it may sound, one day's work had been accomplished as fatigued muscles healed in the hot spring after a relatively faster descent by nine in the morning. A visit to the second largest temple and a terraced village made up the rest of the easy day. By nine at night, there was the smell of ocean, the warmth of sunshine, the rustle of branches, zzz...

Deserving of its nickname as the Mother Temple, Besakih Temple overlooked the rice fields that stretched endlessly and the villages that dotted sparingly underneath with majesty and might. Since it happened to be the second day of a five day full moon ceremony, Balinese men in white sarong suits with matching head wraps trimmed with gold and women in colourful lace tops adorned with bright flowers in their ears and hair brought offerings and prayed on restricted temple grounds. Afterwards, grains



of rice could be found between their eyebrows, on their temples as well as proud chest.

Stocks laden with ripening golden rice cascaded in every direction and filled the air with the satisfying smell of harvest. The occasional cow-drawn plows churned away in preparation for the second planting. Fleets of duck wandered freely and packed carelessly. Gradually, the ride became flatter and less winding, and gave way to Tulamben.



Barely 500 meters long and one block wide, Tulamben makes a mark on any diver's map by boasting four gorgeous diving sites ranging from a ship wreck, coral gardens and a 45 meter drop wall. How much more convenient could the World War II Liberty ship have sank than 25 meters from shore? With divers feeding them bananas regularly, schools of fish have since settled in the vicinity to amuse and be amused.

Waddling deeper and fighting current, the last breath of carbon dioxide was let out of the lungs through the nose while snorkel was jammed in place. What awaited was even more breathtaking! As the sun shone through the rippling surface, rays danced and flickered on the pebbled bottom, where marine life of all shapes and shades flourished. The little ones busy with electric blue and cherry speckles on their backs, Sweet Lips lemon yellow motionless with signature pouty lips, Trumpet Fish sneaking invisible thin and light, and then, in the distance, the ship wreck approached eerily.

No amount of Titanic could prepare the mind for the power and intensity of a ghost ship weighted to the bottom of an ocean, silent, lifeless, looming. No light penetrated the abyss. It was not until an up close and personal inspection the following morning that this initial impression was altered.



Decked out in matching goggles, wet suit, boots down to the fins, one smart looking "fish" dived towards Liberty. The sheer size of the ship was overwhelming, an equivalent comparison might be between a tortoise and an SUV. Decades of moss and seaweed have been collecting on the surface and they appeared suspended along the contours of the ship, waving effortlessly. Approaching closer, various fishes came to view, zipping around and using the nooks and crannies to play hide and seek. It was like a carnival down there. While others swam teasingly close and then sped away just before being touched, one creative silver-bellied fish the size of a long coffee table hung itself up side down and blew strings of bubbles through its gills.

Unfortunately, neither the oxygen tank nor the bladder could keep up with enthusiasm. After devouring lunch, some lazy digestion in the sun was in order before the second dive at coral garden. Shallower, hence better lighted, the specimens here swam in smaller schools. A plump blue starfish slumped with two tentacles over a pebble and the rest on the ocean bed. Equally brilliant, a blue eel with a yellow and double-horned mouth dashed vicious glances at anyone even contemplating on invading its turf, despite its dainty spaghetti physique. Awkwardly, a Box Fish wobbled around

with its tiny fins desperately fanning and an even smaller mouth gasping as if in surprise. Spotting a celebrity has a way of making any trip that much more rewarding and Nemo's presence certainly concluded the day on the highest possible note.

Excursion to an anonymous black sand beach en route to Tanah Lot turned into a wonderful surprise. Blue sky and its clear reflection on the wet black sand melted into the rapid waves to form a horizon of infinite energy. As the sun started to sink in the west, Tanah Lot closed in. Dying the ripples directly underneath first, everything deepened from crimson to burgundy to scarlet. For those magical fifteen minutes, the entire world was void of negativity and saturated by the colour of passion.



A jungle walk was scheduled for the last few hours on this spectacular island, there was simply so much beauty that there was a sensory overload. Even a pair of stunning peacocks surveying on a bungalow roof did not seem all that bewildering.

Each journey has to end somewhere and the one to the Island of Gods concluded with an interrogation session at the Immigrations Office on account of a missing embarking stamp. It would be terrible to have been detained in Bali for life, indeed!

~ to be continued ~



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