

Bali – July 2018

“The mere mention of Bali evokes thoughts of a paradise. It’s more than a place; it’s a mood, an aspiration, a tropical state of mind” – Ryan Ver Berkmoes

Bali is one of more than 17,000 islands that make up the Indonesian archipelago and is located just between Java and Lombok. The island spans 90 miles across and is sometimes referred to as the ‘Island of the Gods’ a title it definitely deserves. With its varied landscapes of volcanoes, rice paddies, deep jungles and beautiful sandy beaches the island provides an amazing backdrop for a deeply spiritual and unique culture. This rich and diverse culture plays out on all levels of life, from delicate flower offerings to processions of traditionally dressed locals - shutting down major roads as they parade to one of the many temple ceremonies - all of which is encapsulated in the unique music and dance performances that tell the story of Balinese life. Almost everything has a spiritual meaning.



Walking through the rice fields outside of Ubud

Home to Indonesia’s minority Hindu community, it is the 4 million local people that really make Bali as special as it is. The inhabitants of this small island are friendly, smiling, genuinely warm people who offered nothing but smiles throughout my trip. As one local, who I became good friends with said, “If you’re happy man, I’m happy too”.

For much of the trip I stayed with a local family in the small village of Penestanan Kaja, just outside of a busy town called Ubud. This accommodation consisted of two rooms each with two bamboo bunkbeds and a small outside toilet and shower. The family compound was very traditional and contained the family temple which, like the pavements outside each house, was covered with flower and rice offerings twice a day. The smell of burning incense was always in the air especially around a four-poster bed that could be found in the compound’s centre. This bed was very important to the family but only used twice by each member; once, on the night they were born, and again on the night of their death. Although Indonesian is the national language of Bali, the locals more commonly spoke Balinese and we began each day by greeting our hosts with the phrase “Selamat siang” (good morning).



Our good friend and guide Dodon

My project consisted of a one week ‘induction’ and then a week of construction and renovation work. The aim of the first week was to immerse ourselves in Balinese culture which involved walks through the local town, visiting markets, monkey-filled forests, rice paddies and sacred hills (known as the make-out spot by locals apparently!). During this week we also had language lessons to learn both Indonesian and Balinese, partook in Batik painting classes and learnt how to cook traditional dishes such as Nasi Goreng (Very spicy chicken and rice). The highlight of this week was probably a visit to Pura Tirta Empul, a religiously important water temple dedicated to Vishnu. Aside from exploring the incredibly detailed buildings and numerous Koi ponds we built our own flower offerings and partook in a religious ceremony to induct us into Balinese life. Standing waist deep in crystal clear water wearing the traditional Sarong with fish swimming between my legs while performing the ceremonial offering was an unforgettable experience. Washing my head under each of the many water fonts with encouragement from local people truly showed their welcoming acceptance and spiritual beliefs.

The second week of my stay in Bali consisted of hard work and long days. Myself and a team of volunteers were charged with renovating a rundown overgrown temple. Work included clearing away any foliage and laying a new temple floor. Throughout the day as we worked, curious locals would bring us warm tea and fried banana and stop to see the progress and talk to us. By the end of my week much of the work had been completed and out of thanks we were invited to attend a ritual dance known as a Kacak. This is performed by a group of chanting males and tells the story of a king who finds a lost maiden and holds her captive. I couldn't tell what was going on half the time but was amazed by the different tones of guttural singing and the accompanying dancers who weaved in and out of huge fires.



A normal day's work on project

I shared this experience with a hugely diverse group of people from across the globe. In my homestay alone, there was a Hungarian girl who lived in Vietnam and worked as UN ambassador, an Californian brother and sister travelling for the first time, two Chinese friends who had moved to Vancouver for university, and a French primary school teacher who taught in Boston. We all spent our evenings relaxing, sharing stories and singing with locals in the bars of Penestanan, notably Kopi Desa, which deserves visiting should anyone every travel to Bali. Again, the friendliness of the Balinese people needs to be expressed; regulars my own age would invite us to sit with them, practise their English and help us with our Balinese. Some took us home to their families for dinner or took us into town to eat where tourists don't normally go. I formed friendships with both volunteers and locals alike and remain in contact with many of them.



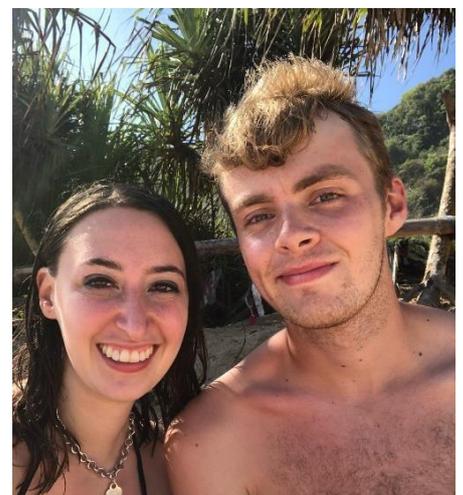
Ready for the French World Cup semi-final match, 2am kick-off

At the weekends we stopped working and were free to explore the rest of Bali. I spent time visiting gorgeous waterfalls, rolling hills of rice paddies and climbing Mount Batur, an active volcano, at 2am to see the sunrise. The highlight of these travels must be to the southern peninsula of Bukit, where we spent our time on hired motorbikes exploring pristine beaches and visiting the famous temple of Ulu Watu to see the sunset.

This was an incredible experience and has fuelled my thirst for even more global travel both to volunteer and to experience new ways of living. I am very grateful to both Green Lion for setting up my volunteering work and to QMUL for helping me to fund such a fantastic trip.



The temple of Ulu Watu not long before sunset – 6pm every day, all year round



Relaxing on Nyang Nyang beach