



Expedition



Report

Indonesia



Social media continues to play an ever so important role in our day-to-day lives, and as a former content creator myself I was all too aware of the perception gap it perpetuated, presenting an out-of-reach ideal as a distant reality. Therefore, I was curious to understand the tangible impact it had on industries that weren't product related, specifically the relationship between the paradisiac holiday destination Bali, Indonesia and the local reality.

I travelled to Bali, Indonesia in June 2018 to photographically document the contrasts between the images on social media promoting Bali as a tourist utopia and the reality for the local people. Queen Mary University of London's expedition fund allowed me to not only partake in this experience, but it also enabled me to see both the 'tourist' side and 'local' side of Bali, safely and respectfully, as I was able to travel around Bali with a local tour-guide to fully grasp the local perspective of tourism.

Since 2015, Bali has seen a 25% increase in tourists, with over 12.6 million foreign tourists visiting Indonesia in 2016 alone, and this increase of mass tourism has resulted in a tremendous amount of environmental damage. Outrage from straws earlier this year prompted many leading companies and institutions (from Starbucks to McDonald's) to ban the use of plastic straws. However, viral videos of "plastic clouds" in Bali's ocean's has failed to generate a substantive response, with tourists enjoying brands who ban plastic straws in their domestic territory while utilising brands that do not when abroad.

The Indonesian Government declared a 'Garbage emergency' in 2017 and aimed to reduce its pollution by a quarter, but unfortunately, it still ranks as the second biggest plastic polluter, falling only behind China, and as mass tourism continues across Bali, there is a link. When speaking to Edy (my local guide) he said Bali has always had a little rubbish problem, but it has never been this bad. What was unsurprising, was the fact the more locals I spoke to, the clearer it was that the majority believed government-led initiatives simply removed rubbish from the purview of tourists and ignored the damage caused to local communities and infrastructure, particularly in northern Bali.

In order to highlight the contrasts between the tourist side and local side of Bali, I had to partake in some of the tourist activities and visit some of the most popular sites. This resulted in the images above on the left, which are akin to something one would say on a travel-friendly Instagram feed. However, my intention was always to disrupt the narrative, rather than perpetuate it. Thus, for every popular attraction, we went to, we participated in various backpacker-led clean-up initiatives such as 'Adventure bag'. Adventure bag was my favourite because it allowed us to remove plastic with plastic, as it primarily involved filling one plastic bag with as much rubbish as you could find. And believe me, there was plenty (as depicted on the right of the above images). But I also got to visit local Hindu Balinese communities and talk to residents about their experiences under the sudden influx of tourism.

As a Politics and International Relations student, my time in Bali, speaking to locals and participating in a variety of clean-ups at popular attractions across Ubud, Munduk and Sanur enabled me to see the practical manifestations of ecologism and globalisation that have been interwoven in a variety of my courses modules.

Bali's economy relies on tourism, and yet, it's where the consequences of environmental degradation are most noticeable. A certain level of understanding is needed when travelling to Indonesia. When I visited the country in June, I got to observe a remote village, and the care and pride the beautiful Hindu people of Bali had when going about their day is in dire need of being replicated in popular Tourist areas like Sanur, Canggu and Ubud.

This experience has taught me the importance of a continuation of values when on holiday. When on vacation it's easy to operate under the mantra what happens on holiday, stays on holiday, but as Nyoman (a schoolchild I spoke to from Sanur) said: "if the tourists stop want plastic then we won't have to give". So, we must pack our ethical standards with us when we depart on our next journey abroad, because more often than not, the reality is far from what's depicted on our social media feeds, affecting both the local and global communities in ways we can't even begin to fathom.

Nonetheless, this was an incredible opportunity, and I will always be grateful for Edy and his family for showing me such a unique side of Bali and for QMUL who helped me fund this experience. A further honourable mention must go to 4Ocean, a company who promises to remove a pound of trash from the ocean for every bracelet they sell. Their work inspired my research in Bali, Indonesia.