

The Road to Bali

All Roads Lead to Bali

With 18,000 islands, Indonesia is a gigantic country if you include the waters surrounding this island nation that straddles the Equator. It is considered the largest Muslim country in the world, but located nowhere near the Middle East. Still, I find visiting Indonesia is more than just Bali which by the way is predominantly Hindu and populated, it seems, by locals and Australian tourists. Of course this is my personal observation and certainly unsubstantiated.

While it has been a couple of years since my last visit to Indonesia's largest city, Jakarta with over 10,000,000 people, things have changed. If you consider the clustered megapolis of Jabodetabek, population 30,000,000, then one could readily guess the real meaning of traffic congestion. But surprisingly, I think it has gotten better. It really seems so and it has been quite pleasant getting around either by taxi or motor bike taxi.

There is one big down side in living in the capital, Jakarta. It was built on swamp land and is literally sinking at the rate of about 10" a year. The hot button topic in Indonesia today is the proposal to move the capital to East Kalimantan (Borneo).

While Indonesia may have many points of interests for tourists, it seems visitors will in one breath mention only Bali. It could be because it is light years ahead of the other cities in supporting tourism. Still, I thought of doing, not planning a train trip across the island of Java would be a nice adventure. With no destinations or planned stops, I booked a train from Jakarta heading eastward. I like train rides and Java has an excellent and reliable system of train travel, an easy going and scenic alternative to flying which, by the way is made easy and accessible by numerous low cost airlines. One airline's motto: "Now Everyone Can Fly" is emblazoned on their fuselages.

Buying a train ticket is easy and can be made on line, except that I wanted to reconnoiter the station before actually traveling. Well, it was an easy 1 1/2 kilometer walk, but after walking a half hour, I decided to get a motor bike taxi with Grab (A popular ride share similar to Lyft). No problem. Getting to the station was easy and safe, I'd say even safer than riding one in Bangkok where most of the drivers are young daredevils who would love nothing better than to beat their old speed record. At least in Jakarta, they don't weave in and out of traffic between buses and trucks and clipping your toes along bus tires. Besides, I opt for the old, experienced drivers. They didn't get to be old by racing.

For the most part, I've mainly taken motor bike taxis because of the convenience and mainly because traffic is so bad in much of Southeast Asia that a cab would often mean sitting in traffic in a car whose a/c might just blow hot air.

Gambir station is Jakarta's newest train station and is simple to use and well organized; it was for me. I actually was able to print out my ticket in Bahasa Indonesia by sheer luck. Surely I have angels here in Indonesia too although I am convinced that they work in shorter shifts because of the stress.

The nice thing is that I have yet to see a Starbucks anywhere and of course the coffee here is the best I've had. The best coffee beans, I'm convinced, come from the islands of Sulawesi and New Guinea. I will be heading to at least one of them.

On this trip, Makassar on the island of Sulawesi was an oven heated traffic night mare, but only because it was August and the city was in the midst of building a mass transit system. I am convinced that they will get it done in the 3-4 years that they predict, unlike Hawaii where the Oahu mass transit is a slow and painful night mare of their own making.

In addition to mass transit by land, Indonesia uses a lot of high speed boats to ferry tourists between islands unlike in Hawaii (again) where protesters stopped the best thing in way of an inter island ferry system. Why is it that we consider ourselves a first world country, but have second rate transportation systems including roads and the very shabbiest of airports in the world. I have yet to see another airport as embarrassingly tired as the one in Honolulu.

Yes, while all roads may lead to Bali, hopefully it will one day be a two way street. President Joko Widodo is cajoling the rest of the country to develop tourism like Bali. Lesser known islands like Flores (a former Portuguese colony) is listening and according to my friends Paskal and Ifun who run a travel agency, the island is booming with tourism. The capital of Labuan Bajo is the jumping off point for visits to the Komodo Dragon islands of Komodo and Rinca.

While tourists from all over the world flock to Bali for its natural beauty mixed with cheap prices close by is Sanur where the pace is serene and easy going...just to my liking. I think I'll jump on a motor bike taxi and head to my favorite place tomorrow.



That's Earle, brother
Sanur, Bali, Indonesia