

TRAVEL



Close encounters in Bali

how earthquakes ask big questions

It was Sunday evening. The concierge confirmed there was a Catholic mass nearby at 6pm but we declined his offer of a hotel taxi having decided to take a chance with one of the many ‘freelance’ drivers that wait patiently in small clusters outside the hotel security gates.

Pádraic Gilligan reports on a recent trip to Bali and how people and events raise some ultimate questions.

Mr Google confirmed the church was less than 3km away and, now knowing the distance, we set about securing our ride. A group of 3 locals stood next to 2 cars. The smaller, older one, cigarette in hand, had good English and asked

for 100,000 Rupiah (a bit less than €6). ‘I’ll give you 50,000, it’s only 2km. Sure we could walk it’, I replied. The three men discussed the offer and the smaller one asked for 70,000. I was firm. ‘No, 50,000. It’s only a short distance’. A further discussion took place and our offer was finally accepted.

Big Questions in Bali

We took our seats in the back of a pretty beat up vehicle while the spokesman for the group took his seat beside the driver in the front. He was small and thin, looked to be in his 60s, had longish hair tied in a ponytail and wispy facial hair.

‘So you’re Christian’, he said as we set off. ‘Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?’ Caught unawares by the candour of the question – it’s not often these days you’re asked to witness so forthrightly to your faith – I stuttered a rather unconvincing ‘Yes, we do’ wondering immediately would I now hear a cock crow?

‘I like Jesus’, he replied. ‘I like his philosophy of brotherly love. I have read the Bible. The old book and the new book. Adam and Eve. Noah and the ark. The stories in the old book are good but the new book is all

about Jesus and the miracles he performs. The new book describes the philosophy and it’s all about love.’

This conversation took place as we plotted a perilous path through evening traffic in Nusa Dua, Bali, scooters cutting in ahead of us as we negotiated our way forward, our driver paying little or no attention to road signs or traffic lights. Our new friend was clearly a seeker, anxious to understand how people from other cultures find answers to the big questions. Like practically everyone we met in Bali, he was humble, unassuming, gentle. His searching questions were perfect preparation for our attendance at mass.

Universal & Catholic

The Catholic church was high on a hillside adjacent to an Anglican church, a beautiful Hindu temple and a Mosque, all the religions clustered together, a bit like a buffet for beliefs. You felt as believers we’re all in this together and while we might go into a different building, these structures are all next door to each other. The service was in English and, at 75 minutes, was much longer than we’ve grown used to in Ireland, with an intriguing series of community announcements at the end including marriage banns.

We opted to walk back to our hotel and eat *en route* at a local restaurant. We made our way down the hill and encountered the ‘real Bali’ having spent days beach-side in a beautiful but ultimately sanitised tourism compound. Dingy street food outlets stood side-by-side with motorcycle repair shops. Sometimes the footpath disappeared completely. You’d see signs for ‘laundry’ and several women would be working away *al fresco* folding and ironing. Traffic – mainly scooters and Honda 50s – streamed continuously up and down the road with little concern for right or left hand side.

Eating locally in Bali

Soon we were back on the main road leading towards the hotel zone. Restaurants now appeared on either side of the road along with the ubiquitous Circle K – mini-markets that

dominate the retail landscape in Bali. It was difficult to make a choice of restaurant but eventually we opted for Raja Bali Restaurant. It appeared to feature local dishes and even offered the famous Indonesian *Rijsttafel*.

We settled on a vacant table outside, close to the street with a party of European tourists adjacent to us. Most tables were occupied by 2s and 4s and there was a nice buzz about the place. The large laminated plastic menus arrived and we considered our options although I'd pretty much decided already it'd be *Nasi Goreng*.

Thinking back now on the sequence of events I recall I looked briefly under the table having felt something at my feet and thinking that my bag had fallen over. Then I noticed that the pillar behind Rita (my wife) which supported the over-hanging canopy under which we were sitting was visibly shaking.

As I remarked on these things to Rita, there was a heightened buzz in the restaurant as others had obviously noticed the shaking too. Next the staff started to become agitated and came streaming out of the restaurant onto the footpath beside where we were sitting. Some were crying. We were still looking quizzically at each other when the chef, in full battle dress and knife in hand, emerged from the kitchen with the speed of a scalded cat. A guy at the table beside us had his mobile phone out and was recording proceedings.



Photos (2): ©courtesy of Padraic Gilligan



By now – less than 15 seconds after we first noticed it – the shaking had subsided. We considered our options and figured the restaurant we'd opted to eat in was structurally dodgy. 'We'll head back to the hotel', we agreed 'and eat there'. As we walked back we noticed lots of people out on the footpath. 'Maybe it wasn't just our building that was shaking?' Then texts and WhatsApp messages began to arrive. 'Are you guys safe? That earthquake measured 6.8.'

Lombok, one of the paradise islands next to Bali, had been hit for the 2nd time by a massive earthquake with a death toll that would eventually reach over 300 people. People also died in Bali. Without knowing it, we'd been on the edge of an earthquake. The canopy under which we were seated could have fallen on us. That Sunday could have been the end for us.

The After Shock

I considered all this as I gathered my thoughts before falling asleep that night. What if it had been the end? Would I have been happy with my last hours on this earth? I thought about the evening. The drive to mass. The fascinating discussion about matters of faith with a stranger. The mass itself – a chance to reflect, give thanks, be inspired, connect with God. The chats with Rita. The realisation of how blessed we've been in our lives together. If it had been our time to depart 'this mortal coil' then, yes, I would have been happy in the knowledge that I was 'in the moment', living it as fully and wholeheartedly as I could.

Oh, and by the way, having negotiated the 50,000 Rupiah ride with our taxi friends I did give them the 100,000 when we alighted at the church! Once a negotiator, always a negotiator. 🍷