

WILD INDONESIA
‘International Expeditions’
12-25 September 1997

I had always wanted to go and visit Indonesia, an archipelago comprising approximately 17,508 islands. The animals and birds on Borneo, Bali and Sumatra’s rainforest sparked my interest to sign up for a tour with International Expeditions.

We arrived on Saturday the 14th of September in Denpasar, Bali and were met by our tour operator and were introduced to the other fellow travelers in our group. It had been a long flight to get to Bali and we were experiencing jet lag. Our guide took us immediately to an area called ‘Monkey Forest’ at the Ulu Watu temples. Here we were met by groups of Crab-eating Macaques. The monkeys were used to being fed by humans, mostly tourists. We were advised to let a local person give us a few treats for the monkeys and we were to feed them. I wanted to regulate my own treats for the monkeys so as the girl handed them to me I pocketed most of the treats and gave out a few to some of the macaques. I knew once the treats were gone the girl would want me to follow her to her tourist trap hut to purchase something. When the treats she had were gone she said “Let’s go to my shop.” I said in a few minutes I want to finish feeding the monkeys myself and then I will go and look in your shop. I finished and then went and found Mike who was surrounded by macaques...one little one was holding on to Mike’s camera lens on one end and Mike taking his picture on the other end. What was really funny was when a young girl ran past me screaming with a macaque on her back. She was running like on fire as the monkey was holding on for dear life...funny! On our way to our overnight resort called Yeh Panas Resort we passed the beautiful rice terraces and colorful countryside. We had busy geckos in our room running around. After dinner I lit an incense stick outside our balcony and the smell filled our room. I remember a swimming pool that overlooked a beautiful scene. The pool edge dropped off suddenly making the pool seem endless. We went for a swim in the lovely pool.

After breakfast our group was driven to see Mount Barukaru and Lake Bratan. We saw a beautiful Java Kingfisher on the lake. We were then taken to visit Batukaru Temple located on the southern slope of Mount Barukaru, Bali’s second-highest volcano. The temple's most important shrine is a 7-tiered meru dedicated to Mahadewa, the God of Mount Batukaru. We left and went to visit Bedugul Botanical Gardens and Temple. Then back to Yeh Panas Resort for the night.

We departed Bali and headed for the city of Yogyakarta, Java. It is renowned as a centre of classical Javanese fine art and culture such as batik, ballet, drama, music, poetry, and puppet shows. We arrived at Natour Garuda Hotel where we would be staying. We enjoyed listening to a gamelan orchestra in the lobby. In the afternoon we went to visit Borobudur a 9th-century Mahayana Buddhist Temple in Magelang, Central Java. The Borobudur monument consists of six square platforms topped by three circular platforms and is decorated with 2,672 relief panels and 504 Buddha statues. A main dome, located at the center of the top platform, is surrounded by 72 Buddha statues each seated inside a perforated stupa. It is the world’s largest Buddhist temple, as well as one of the greatest

Buddhist monuments in the world. Mike and I went through an extensive system of stairways and corridors to reach the top and were awarded with fantastic views and the opportunity to stick our arms inside some of the stupas and touch the Buddha statues inside. We were told that touching the Buddha would bring us good luck.

Our group was taken to a 'Wayang' a Javanese word for a kind of theatre featuring performances using shadow puppets. As the puppets told a local story a gamelan orchestra was playing music. I don't remember the story but the wayang kulit, or shadow puppets, are without a doubt very entertaining. We even had a bit of time to go shopping for souvenirs and my favorite find of buttons. I purchased a large carved mask made for the Royal Sultan's Palace's theatre and assorted buttons at a shop in town.

As early as 4:30 a.m. we were woken up with announcements coming from speakers in the city towers calling Muslims to prayer. Muslims bow down to Allah in prayer five times a day. In our room, on the ceiling, was painted directions to face Mecca. When it is time for prayer you are to make sure your body and place of prayer are clean and follow the rules of prayer. We saw people doing this all around the city. After breakfast we were driven to visit the Sultan's Palace and the Sono Budoyo Museum. Afterwards we went to Prambanan, a 9th century Hindu temple compound in Central Java, dedicated to the Trimurti, the expression of God as the Creator (Brahma), the Preserver (Vishnu) and the Destroyer (Shiva). The temple compound, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the largest Hindu temple site in Indonesia, and one of the biggest in Southeast Asia. It is characterized by its tall and pointed architecture, typical of Hindu temple architecture, and by the towering 47-metre-high (154 ft) central building inside a large complex of individual temples. Prambanan attracts many visitors from across the world. That night Mike and I took a walk to explore the city streets. We were staying near a street claimed to be 'The World's Longest Restaurant Street'. We ventured up and down the street lined with street vendors selling all kinds of food. Big and little establishments were busy cooking and serving dishes to customers. We saw people huddled in circles. We went to see what they were doing. In one of the circles was a person throwing objects down and waiting for them to fall and commenting on the order that the objects fell, like a fortune teller. In other circles people were playing dice games. It was very interesting to see what the locals did at night on this street. We took a late night swim in the hotel pool on top of the hotel. The swim turned out to be interesting as bats soared over the pool and dipped in the water surrounding us at times.

We left the next day to drive to Semarang and overnight at the Graha Santika Hotel. On the way we stopped at Mount Merapi an active stratovolcano located on the border between Central Java and Yogyakarta. It is the most active volcano in Indonesia and has erupted regularly since 1548. Smoke can be seen emerging from the mountaintop at least 300 days a year and several eruptions have caused fatalities. After a long hot hike up to a viewing point to see Mount Merapi the fog was so thick that we could not see the mountain. So I purchased a picture of it at a souvenir shop so I could see what I killed myself hiking to see and had not seen.

Our itinerary was changed from what was planned and we went to Peucang Island which is part of the Ujung Kulon National Park. Our group boarded a small boat with a covered top. We were told that the boat ride was a two hour trip to our destination but the trip turned out to be four hours on rough water. The boat was not in very good shape and when waves would wash up on the boat's roof water would leak in. Halfway through the trip, one of the crew members went to the hatch of the boat and started removing life jackets for us to put on. Fortunately, we did not need them. Anything we had on our laps and ourselves were soaking wet so the sheet of stamps I was protecting in my hand bag was ruined. I learned my lesson and now I carry a water proof bag. I was not able to sit next to Mike on the boat so when the danger of capsizing might occur I looked at Mike and smiled. The TV show Gilligan's Island and the theme song "The Ballad of Gilligan's Isle" going through my head. As we finally approached the island I was relieved that we made it. Our accommodations were primitive but comfortable enough. I love nature and the island experience gave you the sense of being on a deserted island. Monkeys, hornbills, monitor lizards, barking deer and wild boars roamed the island. I brought some snacks for the monkeys in my suitcase. When Mike went to drop off his laundry I put on my bathing suit to keep cool and stepped out onto our patio at the back of our room. At that moment I saw a big monitor lizard run by. I grabbed my camera and tried to follow the lizard. Every time I got close the lizard would move. I looked back at my room and saw a group of monkeys heading for my room where I had left the door open on my hasty departure. I ran back to my room to shut the door...the monkeys gaining on me. I just made it into my room when the group of monkeys jumped on my patio and started pulling on the door handle and jumping on the windows that had bars. I laughed really hard and grabbed the monkey treats and opened the door ever so slightly. As all the monkey hands reached in to grab treats Mike came in the room and I yelled for him to see the mayhem.

Another day a large monkey figured out how to open the main door of the bungalow that several of our groups were staying in along with us. The monkey was in the sitting room raiding the fruit bowl. Banana under one arm, apple in his mouth, another piece of fruit under his other arm the monkey was trying to exit with his loot. Some of the tourists were coming in the front door and the monkey felt trapped. The tourists felt trapped. I said just move away and let the monkey out with his loot and it will be OK. They moved aside and the monkey fled the bungalow with his fruit dropping a few and then gathering them up again. What fun! Due to the drought that Indonesia was experiencing during our visit we could only get cold water and it was only available during high tide. So we put a bucket under the tap in the tub and gathered water to take a bath with. Electricity was also only available at certain times, never when we needed it. We went on several hikes and saw lots of birds. The Blue-throated Bee Eaters were rather colorful. If we had not studied our bird guide before we left home we would not have known half of the birds we saw as our guide was not educated in animal or bird life. And because of the drought many of the grazing areas where animals were supposed to be were deserted. We had several small boats take our group to an area with passages to the parts of the park that we were told Java rhino lived. We did not see any rhino but their tracks were sighted. We did see mud-skipper, fish, birds and my favorite bird, kingfisher, and monkeys, lizards and snakes. We were transported to a larger boat and served lunch

while we cruised down to the Indian Ocean, fish eagles soaring high in the sky. It was Mike's 40th birthday one night and the staff was so nice to make a big fruit plate with a large candle in the middle to celebrate Mike's birthday. They gave him a T-shirt with a rhino on it as a gift. That night we went on a night hike in the rainforest and on a tree branch not far from our heads we saw a coiled up green snake. Hundreds of bee-eater birds covered one tree and a large group of flying foxes soared in the sky. A group of hornbills flew by.

After Ujung Kulon we spent a day at the Charita Resort. Fortunately our boat ride back was two hours and we had good weather. That night at the Charita Resort, which was a god-send hotel with all the luxury of a nice resort, we had a massage and a good dinner. Earlier I flew my kite I had brought with me in the gentle breeze by the water. We were happy that we took the opportunity to explore the grounds of the resort and walk to the waters edge. We were rewarded with visits by hard-backed toads and enjoyed the hotel's garden. In the water we saw large numbers of fishing platforms which at night are easily seen because of kerosene lanterns lit to attract the fish to their nets. It was a wonderful sight. The resort had some benches set up and we took a short rest. How unfortunate that the rest of our group had not seen this wonderful sight as when I had asked our guide if we could see the fishing platforms lit up at night he said NO. I would not have thought to look had I not read about it in one of my travel books.

Because of weather problems caused by El Nino, Indonesia was severely affected. Our itinerary was changed daily. I collected newspaper articles at this time and found them in my photo album. "Forest Fires Across Indonesia Blot Out the Sun", Many of the fires have been attributed to forestry and plantation companies and small farmers using slash-and-burn techniques to clear the land ahead of the monsoon rains – which are badly delayed this year by the El Nino weather phenomenon in the Pacific Ocean the worst fires so far have been reported in eastern and southern Sumatra, Kalimantan on Borneo island and in the remote province of Irian Jaya on New Guinea island., *Herald International Tribune*, Singapore, Thursday, 25 September 1997. "Southeast Asian Disaster Caused by Greed" David Harrison argues that the fires in Southeast Asia are a disaster for the whole world and an inevitable consequence of its twisted values; indifference to pollution, powerful multinationals, lack of law enforcement, official corruption. And, fueling it all, an inexhaustible, unfathomable greed. *The Observer*. Of course our guide, fellow travelers and ourselves were very concern about the people of Indonesia affected by the fires and smoke. Mike was reading the newspapers everyday. Not a good time to be here.

Our group was scheduled to go to Borneo, Tanjung Putting National Park and stay near Camp Leakey Orangutan Sanctuary to see the orangutans and proboscis monkeys. This was to be the highlight of the trip, the reason I picked this tour. All flights to Borneo were canceled. Our guide told us that he was taking us to Sumatra instead to see the Sumatran orangutans found only on the island of Sumatra and that they are rarer than the Bornean orangutans. We were to stay at the Pongo Resort. We all packed up part of our belongings in backpacks given to us by our guide....and later boarded the plane. While on the flight to Medan, Mike asked for an English language newspaper. On the front

page, he read that the authorities are trying to close Medan's Polonia airport due to low visibility! The airlines however were continuing to schedule flights, one of which we were on! Mike commented "I like to be able to see the orangutans, but I don't think it was a wise decision to fly us into an airport that the authorities want closed due to poor visibility." Also he did not appreciate breathing what newspapers had been reporting rather unhealthy air for days on end. We landed safely and departed the plane and saw that the sky was dark with smoke. As we traveled through the main part of town we saw that the fires and smoke had caused problems for the locals. I remember our driver was playing old cassettes of Louis Armstrong music and his demeanor was 'Just another day on the job'. He stopped at a light and in the middle of the divided road was a person with a cloth draped over their head. The driver rolled down his window and gave the person some money. As the person's face appeared from under the cloth I gasped at the person's face that was not half there. The driver told us that the person was a leper and that it was their custom to give them money if you had some to give. I then noticed that the person had no feet just stumps.

We continued to Pongo Resort. We had to carry our backpacks for a distance through a town that was started because of tourists coming to see the orangutans. "Welcome to the rainforest," a man said to us. As we passed small huts with dirt floors I peeked inside one of them and saw children watching TV. As soon as they saw us they ran outside. I had some treats and little toys for them and gave them what I had. As we continued on I saw Thomas' Leaf Monkeys that are endemic to North Sumatra sitting in the trees. One of them ran down the tree and raided a nearby store and stole several bags of munchies. The monkey ran back up the tree and effortlessly tore open the bag, the storekeeper shouting furiously. Since this monkey is special I wanted to stay and watch them play but we had to keep moving. When we arrived near Pongo Resort we had to get in a canoe and forge across the river to the other side. Once there we had lunch and some rest. The resort was a nice place in the rainforest. Our bungalow was nice but the temperature in the rainforest was hot and very humid. We were always wet and hot. We were told to keep our doors and windows locked, especially at night because the orangutans knew how to open them and would get in our room.

Next night at dinner our guide looked solemn and worried. He told us to bow our heads and give a moment of silence. The same flight we had come in on the day before had crashed into mountainous woodlands 30 miles from Medan killing all 234 people aboard after the pilot reported thick smoke in the area. As of this date, Garuda Indonesia Flight 152 remains the deadliest aviation accident in Indonesian history. *The Jakarta Post*, Tuesday, 30 September 1997 reported: 14 foreigners among the Garuda-152 crash victims. A mass grave near the Polonia Airport in Medan served as a burial place for forty-eight of the crash victims. Forty-four of the coffins contained the remains of unidentified bodies while the other four contained torn and charred limbs. The mass grave is located on the same site as the cemetery for 62 people killed in the Garuda F-28 crash in 1979. The last thing the control tower heard from the pilot was "Allahu Akbar" (God is great). We had been informed that our families had been notified by International Expeditions that we were not on the plane which had crashed and were safe.

On our return home we found out that no such notification had been given to our family. Had we known that we would have notified our family ourselves.

The next day our adventure of seeing the 'Sumatran orangutans' derived from the Malay words for "person of the forest" was planned. We went on a hike up a mountain to where the orangutans came daily to a platform on stilts in the forest. Everyday the orangutans were given a mixture of bananas and coconut milk as a supplement to their forest diet. As we stood at our designated area we heard noises of approaching orangutans. We were told not to look at the male orangutans as they might attack or be frightened of us. As we bowed our heads a male orangutan came within arms length of us. Mike noticed that he had draped his camera on post near him and thought twice about getting it. The orangutan looked at it but passed it by. Swinging on vines effortlessly other orangutans came out of the forest and approached the feeding station, some mothers had babies clinging to their breasts. We watched quietly as the orangutans ate the bananas and drank the coconut milk. One male orangutan drank the mixture and then spat it out in a straight line and then supped it back into his mouth in the other direction and looked at us. The guide said that he was showing off. I thought it was hilarious! Just being in the rainforest and listening to the birds and watching the orangutans seemed unreal. It was a very hot climb and I did it quickly so I could get a good viewing spot and now it was time to descend the mountain. Some older folks had hired porters to actually carry them up and down the mountain. We went to visit the same feeding station the next day and saw different orangutans that day.

Another day while we were on Sumatra we spent over three hours driving to a partially constructed eco-lodge. We had a short presentation about how the government and various organizations which were trying to encourage eco-tourism through projects like the one we were visiting. Mike commented that this trip was all fine and dandy but didn't think the six hour round trip was worth seeing a half completed eco-lodge and in addition to the traveling there was much more smoke there than at Pongo Resort. We barely had time to relax at the resort before we had to get to dinner. I remember that it started to rain on our hike back to the resort. Our guide mentioned that when it rained the snakes would come out of hiding. I was trying to use handrails, made out of tree branches, as much as possible to avoid slipping on rocks used for steps. As I grabbed one of the handrails it started to move under my hand. I looked and my hand was wrapped around a python! "Mike look", I yelled as it slithered away. When we got to the river to cross the river was raging. We made it across and were soaking wet. We actually felt cool instead of hot, refreshed but tired. As Mike climbed the open stair entrance to the lodge for dinner his foot slipped and his leg went in between the steps. His leg was bruised and swollen that night....I knew it must of hurt a lot. We were told to pack up for a very early departure. That proved to be difficult as we had no lights in the room and could not see. I got my flashlight and gathered up my stuff and packed and then packed Mike's stuff as he was tending to his damaged leg.

The next day did not start off on the right foot. We were transported to the Medan airport and were told that flights had been canceled due to the airlines finally being convinced by the plane crash that perhaps visibility was becoming a bit of a problem. We waited for

some time at the airport. In order to return to Jakarta as planned our guide charter a bus to take us nearly the entire length of Sumatra, through the forest fires to a ferry station for our return. We call this "The 48 Hour Bus Drive From Hell." By this time we had begun to understand how our guide operated and in fact a betting pool was established regarding what our arrival time would actually turn out to be. (The guides estimated 36 hours.) We had one bus driver and one lookout. Since visibility was literally less than a meter the lookout would instruct the driver as to the direction of the road. The driver was driving like a madman and constantly blowing the horn to inform oncoming traffic. The lookout was smoking cigarettes constantly. To add further interest, the bathroom could be smelled throughout the bus and the drivers seemed to have unusual theories about temperature control. I woke from an exhaustion nap and saw a large cockroach or another species of bug crawl out from a widow crack and approach me, I flung it aside. A woman from the front of the bus got up to go to the restroom and fell in the aisle. For sustenance we stopped at a Padang restaurant along the road. We were served many, many plates and bowls filled with the cuisine of the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra. It is common to eat with one's hands. They provided a bowl of tap water with a slice of lime in it to wash our hands before and after eating. This was definitely not my choice of food so I was not eating, and I was afraid of getting sick. Our guide noticed me not eating and said he would stop at a store and see if there was something I could buy to eat. I told him that I had some cookies and peanut butter and crackers and was fine. As I was not eating I went to the bus early and was surprised to watch the bus driver and lookout throw garbage from the bus literally on to the front yard of the restaurant and then empty the toilet on the ground from the bus in the same place. When we drove away I felt bad about dumping our garbage on this establishment. Because the bus drivers had sprayed the bus with some kind of disinfection I was having problems breathing at first. We finally approached the ferry station and were told to stay together as much as possible on the ferry as it might not be safe. Oh well what else could happen, didn't want to think about it. We got back to Jakarta and transported to our hotel.

It was apparent at this time that the Sulawesi extension we had paid for was not going to start on time. A good portion of the extension, three of the five days, was time spent traveling and we were going to start two days late. Mike and I had decided we had had enough by this point and asked Gatod our guide to book us a flight to L.A. when he rebooked the flights for the folks who had not signed up for the extension. He did not indicate that this would be a problem. When we approached Jakarta, we asked Gatod about our flight reservations. He indicated that we did not have a confirmed reservation and would have to go to the airport and fly stand-by. Mike indicated that that was not acceptable. Gatod said the only flight we could be sure to get on was the originally scheduled Friday flight. We found out from some fellow travelers that they had made arrangements with Gatod to spend a few days on Bali instead of flying to Sulawesi and we agreed to do that as opposed to flying stand-by to L.A. We were so glad we made this decision because what happened next was yet another surprise. An earthquake on Sulawesi hit 6.0 on the Richter Scale killing at least 14 people on Sunday. Officials said 30 houses and buildings were flattened and hundreds were damaged. Some of our fellow travelers held hope that the extension to Sulawesi was still possible. After spending all day at the airport to board a plane all planes were grounded.

We liked Bali and our decision to go back there instead of Sulawesi was a good choice. We spent our last few days exploring the town of Ubu and attending a Balinese Kecak and Fire Dance. We hire a taxi and took some fellow travelers with us to go shopping and exploring on our own. Our taxi driver stayed with us all day and we had a great time.

When we got home Mike wrote to the operators of International Expeditions and so did other fellow travelers. Mike explained how we really were disappointed not getting to go to Borneo, which was to be the highlight of the trip. We expressed our opinion that had we been told about the serious drought and uncontrolled fires in Indonesia we would of withdrawn from the trip and scheduled for a future trip. We requested a refund on the Sulawesi extension but International offered vouchers for money off a future trip with them instead.

We did take a future trip with International Expeditions to Galapagos Islands. That was a great trip and with no delays. That is another story to be told.

I always say: Happy Trails! You gotta go with the flow when traveling you never know what will happen. One of these days I hope to travel back to 'Wild Indonesia'.

Audrey and Mike Lambert

(This story was written March 2014, seventeen years after our trip to 'Wild Indonesia' but still fresh in my memory).