

In 2017, Bali welcomed over 14 million visitors, 2 of them being myself and my partner, with all our worldly possessions in tow. We decided to do the millennial thing, which was basically saying “screw it” to our corporate lives, packing it all up and moving to the island of the gods for a year. In search of a slower pace of life, some of the best diving in the world and of course, that #islandlife everyone goes on about, we figured Bali would be the perfect fit – not too far from home but far removed enough from the stresses of first-world living. Bali had always been one of our favourite weekend getaways, so making it home seemed perfectly natural.



*Yep, this all cost me less than renting a master bedroom in central Singapore.*

The thing is, and this is probably true with any country, is that living in Bali is very, very different from visiting Bali for a couple of weeks. Longtime expats all say the same thing, that Bali either breaks you or makes you fall even harder for her. I sit firmly in the middle, the haze of cheap Bintangs and piña coladas long cleared from my brain. I still love her crystalline waters teeming with wildlife and funky corals; the incredibly affordable cost of living (for what I'd pay for one bedroom in Tiong Bahru, I get a massive 300m<sup>2</sup> space that includes a pool) and the lack of stress that comes with every office-bound job. But the idea that I would make Bali my permanent home has gone the same way the trash around here does: up in smoke.





*A fresh pile of trash waiting to be burned.*

### **On pollution**

Speaking of smoke, the biggest disappointment for me about Bali is the quality of life. It's choke full of hipster cafes selling organic everything, with yoga and meditation retreats proudly advertised everywhere, but what many people don't see is the horrid pollution of land, air and water that is an inescapable part of Bali living. Trash burning is a very real problem that the government has been trying to solve for years, and one that I've been trying to live with for the last year. My neighbor (who in fact, owns the land my villa is built on) is a kindly old man who burns a massive pile of trash daily, one hand waving to me as I pass him by and the other poking the stinking, burning pile with a stick like you would a bonfire. "It's their way of life, their customs!" you might argue. Well, I'd prefer it if their customs didn't whoosh into my house in the form of ash and smoke every other day. If they're not burning their trash, then they're just dumping it into their rivers, which inevitably, end up in the seas that I go diving in – I have not been on a single dive where I haven't spotted some piece of trash tangled in the corals or being pecked at by fish that thinks it's food. Let's not even talk about general littering – even the *nature reserve* in West Bali is covered in trash. My guide was walking us through some mangrove swamps and had proudly pointed to the trees proclaiming they're hardy trees because they can "survive even the worst pollution". Cue face palm.



### **On her natural beauty**

I only bemoan the lack of respect given to nature only because Bali is so, so beautiful. There is a little bit of everything, from the lush vegetation in central Bali to the sparkling turquoise waters that fade to deep navy along the island's coast. Head north into the mountains where the temperatures drop low enough to blanket the landscape in a refreshing fog, and in the south the waves crash against imposing cliffs covered in emerald green trees. This also means there is plenty to do in the way of interacting with nature, unlike living in the city.





*Oceanic manta ray spotted off the coast of Nusa Penida*

For a small-ish island, it is truly quite astounding how many different types of activities are available. You can climb a volcano and be treated to a sunrise unlike anything you could imagine on one day, and do a 180 the next day and dive deep down into the blue to see *mola mola* (sunfish), oceanic manta rays and sharks. In between these extremes are hikes that take you through pretty rice paddies, or through canyons with unique reliefs carved by the rushing river over thousands of years. If you're an adrenaline junkie, there is everything from mountain biking to kite surfing, and if not, yoga or meditation retreats set deep within the jungles or high up in the mountains. Many think all there is to Bali is her beaches, but if you care to venture from beyond your sunbed parked in the private beaches of fancy beach clubs, you'll find that it is nearly impossible to do everything in just a few days.

### **On 'rubber time'**

Every expat will tell you this: the average Balinese has absolutely no concept of time, or at least, they don't seem to concern themselves too much with it. If you've engaged someone to come and say, fix a leaking shower at 1pm, what you've really agreed to is to sit around and wait because they'll likely arrive anytime between 1pm-4pm. Coming from a first world city, where being even 5 minutes late is a sin, I was completely bewildered by how no one seemed to bother that the other party might have another engagement, or anything better to do than sitting around and waiting all day. The same applies for ordering in restaurants (with bigger names like Motel Mexicola or Sisterfields being the exception) – it's no cause for concern if customers are left sitting around and waiting for an hour for their meal (and no, don't expect the manager to give you discounts or anything like that either). I've since learnt to chill, because I don't think I could wait long enough for high blood pressure medication.

PS: this however, is not applicable to the transport sector. Every driver I've engaged is not only on time; they usually arrive way ahead of time. They will then proceed to drive like a mad man to drop you off in record time, so they can speed off elsewhere to pick up another customer. It is a system that admittedly, benefits both parties, although I'm also sure it is why I've grown a few strands of white hair since moving here.

### On the people

That being said, they are usually so nice and friendly that their lack of time management doesn't really get to you too much. Unlike other parts of the world where people are immediately dismissive of you if you don't speak the local language, the Balinese are always willing to try to speak English, filling in the gaps by talking with their hands. I guess I can't say the same for Singapore, where I was once told off by a Chinese bus driver for not being able to tell him the name of the industrial park I was going to in Mandarin. The kindness and gentleness of the Balinese was something I couldn't get used to at first (what do you want from me, exactly?), but over time I came to realize that people *can* actually just be nice without having an ulterior motive. I love how everyone is always smiling at each other, and not at their phones.



Another day, another ~~nuclear apocalypse~~ short errand run. Heading out by bike means protecting every square inch of your face from small rocks and flies that somehow always manage to land straight in your eyes.

## On transport

Most of Bali gets around on either motorbikes, or massive, gas-guzzling SUVs that are clearly too big for the narrow *gangs* (alleys) and streets of the island. Public transport is limited to buses that run only along the bypass, and even then I'm not 100% sure they're actually in effect, because even though I've seen the bus stops, I've never actually seen any buses stopping at them, or people waiting in them, for that matter. Walking is out of the question, because apart from some streets in more developed tourist spots like Seminyak and Ubud, there are few sidewalks to be found, which is one of those things I never thought I would miss. Even then, said sidewalks usually have motorbikes or cars parked on them, so you'd end up walking on the busy streets anyway. In fact, I've nearly been run over *on* the sidewalks, so the streets might be a tad safer because at least you know the the vehicles are where they are supposed to be... most of the time.

## On food

As annoying as some of the expats can be here (the Bali Expat Facebook group is a clear indication that the majority have spent way too many hours in the sun), I have to admit, many of them are doing amazing things in the way of food. In more developed areas like Seminyak and Bali's gastronomic hub Ubud, there is a crazy variety of cuisines to choose from. Of course, not all of them are good, but I've had some incredible Greek, Mexican, Caribbean, Peruvian, Italian and even Japanese food here for a fraction of price compared to any other big city. There are also many iterations of Indonesian cuisine, from homely *warung*-styled fare to upscale, multi-course fine dining interpretations. The choice is literally, quite endless and coming from Singapore, aka the food capital of the world, I was pleasantly surprised to have had such great meals here. If you visit, I highly recommend that you skip the usual hipster cafes and their avocado toast (any idiot can smash some avocado on a piece of bread – don't pay for that shit) and try something different. Most of these places are owned and run by natives of that country, so you know it's legit. It's truly impressive how've they managed to work with local ingredients and transformed it into something that tastes like home, despite being separated by thousands of miles of land and ocean.





Yet, as affordable as dining out here is, it's not practical for the waistline or wallet to do so everyday, so cooking at home is a must. Prior to my move, my plan was just to shop at the local wet markets, but I gave up on that idea pretty quickly because they start running from 5am and close before 8am. Instead, I turned to online, where there are dozens of produce delivery websites offering incredibly cheap fruit and vegetables that are all – get this – organic and/or heritage. This is a huge plus of Bali living for me, considering that back home, a single head of organic broccoli cost SGD\$15. How these sites work is that they connect the farmers directly with the consumer, which not only cuts out excess fees from the middle man, but also allows these farmers to make more money. It's farm-to-table without the usual hipster frills, and it's something I'm going to miss terribly once I'm back in the city.



*It sure looks safe, but you'll never know for sure.*

### **On ATMs**

With surprisingly, not too much pain involved, I actually managed to set up a local bank account within the first few weeks of moving in. With DBS's free overseas remits to Indonesia, I saved a ton of money not having to pay \$5 bank charges each time I withdraw cash, and also my life's savings, because the ATMs here are dodgy as hell. This is because ATM skimming is as commonplace as littering in Bali – you read about some poor expat or tourist bemoaning thousands of dollars having been drained from their accounts almost every other week. Even the ATMs located *within* banks (guarded by security and CCTVs) are at risk, so I devised a strategy to ensure that would never happen to me: I would transfer exactly the amount of money I needed to my local account every month, withdraw everything and leave my account empty. Then I would nervously clutch my bag full of cash (another thing I will not miss, the ridiculous denominations here), and hurry back to the safety of my villa to lock everything up in a safe.

This is of course, after I've spent a good 10 minutes jiggling the keypad and card slot of the ATM to ensure no one has tampered with it, and inspecting every nook and cranny of the machine for hidden cameras. I pay for almost everything in cash, because I've read stories of card fraud from tourists who used their cards in restaurants and shops too. Because of this, I look forward to every visa run back to Singapore, where I Paywave every opportunity I get, often for things I don't even need just to revel in the luxury of safe, cashless transactions.





*Sunrise as seen from the summit of Mount Batur*

I moved here not really knowing what to expect, beyond that of what I've seen as a tourist at least, and when people ask how my year has been, I always say the same thing. That it is definitely a *kind* of paradise, but paradise has never been about places. It merely exists in moments.



*Honestly, you can't complain too much when the #resortlife is literally in your backyard*

Would I go back to Bali after this? Of course – I might have sounded horribly bitter at some points, but Bali will always have a special place in my heart, and even after living here for a year, I've barely scratched the surface of what she has to offer. But maybe I'll take a few months to enjoy city living again, paid via Paywave, of course.