

AUGUST 25, 1994

A guide met the plane from Hawaii at Denpasar in Bali. July second disappeared crossing the International Date Line, so it was the third of July in Indonesia. Help is important to the traveler arriving from an 11.5 hour flight across multiple time zones. His stability wavers, not to mention the results were he to negotiate the cab fares and settle the porter services after being worn so ragged by jet lag he feels and looks like his spine has collapsed.

Indonesia is a Moslem country. Bali, however, is 90 percent Hindu. Temples run into the thousands, the books say. In the interim that all hotels need to accommodate groups, we visited a temple on a cliff overlooking the Indian Ocean.

Outsiders stopped for a yellow sash to wear in the sacred grounds. Among the restrictions posted at the gates of the temple were: "Mad men/women not permitted and ladies who are pregnant."

Long stairways that the Hindus believe keep out the demons led up to an open-air level. There rascal-like monkeys poised on rock ledges and stair rails, waiting for the chance to snatch sunglasses or cameras. Sightseers mingled in processions of worshippers making offerings to the gods. No one appeared disturbed by intrusions of flash cameras and packs of rowdy kids bedeviling the monkeys.

On the van to the hotel, I longed for a monkey to dump the gear from my pack. In a briefing on customs, one precaution for Indonesia was to be prepared to eat with your hands in the provinces. I'd brought along a matched set of chopsticks to avoid such a mess. I felt foolish after seeing the cutlery at the restaurants. I planned, if folks started laughing, to tell them all Texans used chopsticks except the actors on the TV show "Dallas."

The hotel turned out to be a stage setting for an Indian rajah's quarters. The carved mahogany bed was backed and covered over the top by red and gold tapestries. Off the bathroom, flowering vines on rocks walled the shower. In a private garden a straw roof shaded a couple of mats to rest outdoors. Complimentary tea came to the room at four o'clock.

The itinerary allowed for one extra day in the city of Ubud to shop, Ubud being the famed place of artists and special fabrics. At dinner, however, a deal came up to share a car and driver to tour the northern part of Bali. So at daylight the next morning, I joined the party and made an all-day trip of the jungles and villages on the island.

The Toyota van was designed to run endurance races. We tore through towns, scattering people and chickens in all directions. Potholes reached enormous dimensions and herdsmen beat their hogs out of our path. Once the road narrowed to the width of a trail in our national parks. But on we flew up into the highlands overlooking rice paddies and sparing the lives of peasants carrying everything from dish pans to baskets of 50 or 60 pounds of green cauliflowers on their heads.

The dominant theme was taking nature walks where the driver proved to know the birds and the plants along jungles trails leading up and around the grounds of countless Hindu temples. She admitted she had studied languages and worked hard for the job. "Guiding tourists," she said, "is much superior to laboring in the rice fields."

Much of the rice grown in Indonesia comes from Bali. The farmers struggle in muddy fields working water buffaloes and forcing the recalcitrant beasts to pull a wooden plow. The small patches have only one person to weed and control the water. The sole luxury is a straw hut up on the terrace for a place to rest.

At lunch, I realized this was a Fourth of July picnic. Limited English made it impossible to explain our customs. However, the sandwiches were good and the fruit had been washed in purified water, a lesson all travel services abroad need to learn.

I contacted the group at nightfall. Few places in Southeast Asia accept credit cards. I had enough money to pay my bill, but decided I'd better run a test on this gathering of Americans and Canadians to find the soft touches for future emergencies.

It was a prudent move. We were all crowded around a cashier's counter when I exclaimed: "My, I am a bit short!" Just as I suspected, the Canadian guy froze and the old gal from Illinois threw her head up like a wild cow peering from the herd in the cow jungle of Texas. Had it not been for an Arkansas doctor from Little Rock, and had it been true need, I'd have been thrown on the mercy of a foreign court.

Travel does teach you to be prepared