

## Our trip to Bali and Borobudur Dr. Jharna Chatterjee

A few years ago, we traveled to Bali, the exotic jewel of an island in Indonesia. We arrived at Denpasar, the capital of Bali province, by plane and stayed in Santika beach hotel in Kuta. Right from the very first day, we were out walking all over the town looking for a nice, quiet beach where we could enjoy the sapphire-blue ocean without having to face hundreds of offers of local merchandise like jewelry and handicrafts, or service offers such as rental cars, manicure or pedicure, hairstyling and on and on. The funny thing is that we discovered on the second last morning that the hotel itself had a private beach that could be reached just by taking a leisurely stroll through the hotel gardens full of dazzlingly beautiful, fragrant, honey-dripping trees. In the evening, we sat on the beach, watching the magnificent sunset. Later we had an option of eating hot sand-cooked fresh fish right then and there – which, being a coward, I passed.

While the majority of Indonesians are Moslems, Bali is predominantly Hindu. There are little temples on the sidewalks everywhere, and what impressed me most was that people of all ages, including teenagers wearing jeans and t-shirts, were worshipping daily at these temples or burning incense in the evenings at their own little shrines. In the morning, it was quite common for us to see tiny leaf-baskets filled with crackers, fruits and flowers in front of each store, offered to the deities. Even growing up in India had not prepared me for this universal daily ritual.



I used to sit next to the swimming pool watching the local staff making exquisitely beautiful decorative items out of simple plant material – long strips of leaves and flowers. See the completed decoration at the bottom.



We were taken to a temple to watch a traditional dance (Barong) with traditional music and traditional costumes – based on a story of the Hindu epic Ramayana, yet with a distinct Balinese flavor. Unfortunately, I was unable to take any good photographs of the dance drama or the colorful musicians playing their traditional instruments.

Right: A young lady worshipping at the shrine, with her offerings in leaf-baskets on a tray; mounds of other such baskets are on the table next to her.



Bali is renowned to be the island of thousand temples. We were fortunate to see one of the famous, biggest temples, and believed by many Balinese people to be the most sacred one. . The Besakih Temple is also known as the "Mother Temple of Bali". It sits on top the of Mount Agung, and stands 3,000 feet tall. The inner shrines, dedicated to Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu can be reached by climbing a long flight of steps, and then going through the typical split gates of Balinese temples.



Besakih Temple

Our next destination was Jakarta, a bustling, modern Indonesian city. We flew from Jakarta to Yogyakarta to see the famous Buddhist "*stupa*" (traditional burial structure for Buddha's remains) of Borobudur. It was a stunning sight: a bright sun shone above the largest structure I had ever laid my eyes upon. It is a huge, symmetrical, pyramid-like structure at the lower layers, and covers a total surface area of 2,500 square meters. It is renowned to be the largest Buddhist '*stupa*' in South-East Asia and one of the largest in the world. The lowest five tiers are square concentric steps with carvings of animals, stories from Buddha's life, Buddhist teachings and ancient life in Java. The upper three tiers are concentric circular terraces with numerous (72) small '*stupas*', each with a statue of meditating Buddha within those latticed walls.



Borobudur Stupa

To see the relief pictures (right) in each and every tier, we walked five kms. clockwise like all pilgrims from the lowest to the uppermost tier. The symbolic meaning of this journey is that we start at the mundane level and then climb upwards spiritually toward "*nirvana*" which is represented by the topmost empty '*stupa*' in the centre.



I was interested in finding out about the symbolism of the structure of the '*stupa*'. The '*stupa*' is said to be a symbolic replica of the world – the lower tiers are squares facing the four principal directions with the upper '*mandalas*' or circles representing eternity and perfection. The '*mandala*' or the circle points to the way to achieve oneness with the universe through meditation. I also read that "The Indian board game known as Parcheesi is one of the oldest in the world. The 'pilgrim', beginning at one of the four entrances, strives in the contest of life itself to arrive at the center -- finding the self. The relation to the mandala and sacred space is physical as well as visual." (source: rogershepherd.com/WIW/solution12/symbol)

According to the guide, sometime around 775 AD, the-then Hindu rulers in the area started building the complex and built the first two terraces; then it was left abandoned for many years. The Buddhist Sailendra dynasty took over the construction later, and completed the '*stupa*' during the period 790 to 835 AD. Then it lay in ruins covered in volcanic ash and vegetative growth for centuries before it was rediscovered in 1831 and restored. The restoration was completed in 1973. Another massive temple complex can be seen near Borobudur, called Pramadan, which our guide said was a Hindu temple complex. The Borobudur has been designated as a World Heritage site by the United Nations, and it most certainly deserves to be.

Author's Note: All photos presented in this article were taken by the author. The primary purpose of writing this article is to share some of the personal delights during this trip to Bali and Jakarta (Yogyakarta), and not as a travel guide. The Internet is full of articles and useful information provided by Travel Agencies or Travel Guides, which is not an objective here.