

When Kathleen was a little girl, she was enchanted by the film “Road to Bali”, which etched an image of paradise in her memory and made her dream of far away islands, so when we had the opportunity to go there to fly kites, we simply had to accept.



We spent a long time packing. Our weight limit was 2 x 20kg hold baggage and 2 x 7kg hand baggage. We went to my work, where they have a pallet truck with a weighing function and piled things on and off the pallet, trying to make it fit:

- Gecko + Manta? Too much.
- Gecko + Centipede? Too much.
- Manta + Centipede? Too much.

So we cut the tail off the Manta!

One bag took the Gecko, a 16m pilot, the spars from the Centipede and the tail of the Manta Ray plus some line. The other bag took the body of the Manta, the fabric of the Centipede, some pilot line and one pair of socks. The piranha drogue, the pilot kites, most of

the flying line and a small amount of clothes went into the hand baggage.

It was a long flight. 12 hours to Singapore, then another 2 and a half to Denpasar, but Singapore Airlines did their best to make it pass. I was impressed by the video player in the 747-400. Rather than a bank of tape players, it would appear that they use disk based video streamers. Not only were there dozens and dozens of channels of film and TV but the handset had fast-forward, pause and rewind functionality. Genuine video-on-demand, you could choose to watch the film of your choice starting at the time of your convenience. There was however, one drawback – the video handset was stored in the side of the seat and it didn't take much fidgeting to jog it onto the next channel – when you turned the channel back, it had lost your place and you had to laboriously skip forward or back to resume your place.

Kevin Sanders was on the plane from Singapore but it wasn't till we saw him with Made Yudha at the airport that we realised that he was a kite flier and the official representative of the people of Australia.

Made clearly has some impressive contacts in the right places because he met us just off the plane, *before* customs and immigration. He took our passports and handles all the immigration paperwork. Visitors please note: it costs 250,000 rupees each to get in to Bali. It's a big number but it equates to around US\$25. And don't spend all your money before you leave, it costs 100,000 to get out again!

We bundled everything into the back of a minibus and headed for Tanah Lot. First impressions of Bali from out the window of the minibus included:

- Scooters. Hundreds of them. Cars very much in the minority.
- Stray dogs. Often lying in the road.
- Small traders. It seemed like the entire journey was along roads lined with small businesses, selling one thing or another
- Shrines. We would seldom see a house or a shop that didn't have a shrine outside, wrapped in fabric with bamboo or leaf

decorations.

- Kites. As we approached Tanah Lot, we spotted more and more kites. Some small, but mostly large, bamboo framed kites stored in public shelters and halls.



When we checked into the hotel, it was dark and we were exhausted but we did see our first gecko and we knew that we would be at home.

In the morning, the sunshine woke us up and we stepped onto the balcony to be greeted by the vibrant green that characterizes Bali.



We went down to breakfast to discover that the staple diet here is rice. Not just for lunch and dinner but breakfast too. Sure, they pander to western taste with bread and coffee but it's clear that a normal breakfast out here is boiled or fried rice, not rice crispies.

Over the years, we have become accustomed to the fact that we are usually amongst the first on the kite field but in Bali we were in

for a shock. We had been provided with a couple of students to help us out and they were sat, waiting for us every morning at around 7am. We walked down to the field and the place was buzzing with life. Huge kites took up the width of the road as we plodded slowly to the rice paddies.

A shelter had been provided for the international guests and we dumped the bags and prepared for flying, tying the tail back onto the Manta Ray. The main field was occupied with local teams, so we went to a side-field and tried things out. The field was different from a normal kite field in a couple of important respects:

- There was no fence round it. We were amongst the people, not separate from them.
- It was stepped! It might be covered in grass but it was built into steps for growing rice.

But most importantly, the crowd were warm and friendly and more than willing to help. We didn't have anything to anchor with but that didn't matter – we could simply hand them the line and they would happily help us hold down the Manta Ray or the Gecko by manpower alone.

I found that a useful technique was to tie the line round my waist and act as a backstop, sat on the ground. They would take all of the strain and I was just there for security with the line slack in front of me. There were times when I would struggle to even see the kite I was flying for the number of people who wanted to come and join in.

With the 16m Pilot kite, I could hold it comfortably on my own and I was messing around with Kathleen when we slipped and fell down a step in the field. The crowd roared with laughter at our folly but they were also quick to react – five pairs of hands had grabbed the line before we hit the ground.

The Friday was intended primarily for local fliers but we got a slot in the main field towards the end of the day. When I walked onto the field, I was greeted by one of the local teams holding a flying line

and running sideways across the field in response to some impending catastrophe in the air. This wasn't in an empty field. They were running a cheese-wire through a crowd. Unlike flying in the West, everyone understood what to do – they didn't run away (that doesn't work in a crowd), they didn't complain, they just ducked under the line.

It suddenly dawned on me. This wasn't the usual sort of audience at a kite festival. These people were kite fliers, every one of them.

Flying for the crowd was lovely. They cheered when we launched something, they laughed when anything went wrong. We launched the Manta and gave it to a crowd, moved on and launched the Gecko, handed that over, then launched the pilot. The gecko did get the better of them eventually and dragged them down the field, but it was all part of the fun.

The main field didn't have the steps of the side field, but it did have lumps:



I had never noticed how much of kite flying involves walking backwards until I had to do it in a field with hundreds of bowling balls hidden under the surface. Falling over in a backwards somersault was a regular part of the display. There was a joke amongst the fliers that the site had been picked not because of the wind or the scenery but rather because it was too lumpy for growing rice.

The organisers were concerned that we would find the field too small. Certainly, it was narrower than most fields, but at the same time it seemed larger too:

- There was no row of evil metal spikes round the perimeter
- There was no roads anywhere near it

- There was no power cables
- There were no vehicles in the way

In fact, there were no clear boundaries anywhere. Downwind, there was a large grassy paddock sloping down to a stream, a beach and the sea. We saw one local kite land in the waves and get recovered. Andreas from Sweden sacrificed a kite to the Indian Ocean. To one side was further fields of grass and to the other was the shelters for the fliers. Behind us was a dirt track and more open paddock. We had all the space we needed.

Learning about flying

I have been flying kites as an adult for well over a decade. I have studied my craft and learned from the best. As a result I have grown used to being in the position where I feel well educated about kite flying, But I was wrong – Bali showed me that I was missing some of the basics. I had much to learn:

- Offerings. When we came out to the field in the morning, we found little offerings on the field, each one made from leaves, containing different flowers, rice, bamboo and leaves. They were there as an offering to ensure good wind. And they worked! Every day was blessed with ample steady wind and bright sunshine. So that we wouldn't trample them, we moved them back to the anchor stakes with a quiet request that the anchors would stay safe and sure enough the flimsy bamboo anchors held fast.



- Music. We learned that music is an integral part of kite flying. Each local team had it's own percussion band. They would play with enthusiasm and great skill to accompany the launch, flying and recovery of their team's kite. The picture below shows the traditional instruments – a hand-gong on the left, several cymbals playing a syncopated rhythm a drum which was used to lead the melody and a big gong, carried between two men.



- Teamwork. I spoke with Imd Sunantra, one of the local fliers about his team. They had come from 5km away, with the kite on the back of a truck (taking up most of the width of the narrow roads). They brought two kites. The number of people who came to help them fly was 200. He brought 300 portions of rice and chicken for lunch and they really needed 400 portions to feed all the hungry fliers.
- Flying high. Back in the west, it feels like I am the only person who likes to take big kites and fly them high but in Bali everyone understands this. It is difficult to capture this in a picture but look at the kites below. Each of these kites is a 5m x 10m monster, flying at an altitude of 200 or 300 meters.



- Dress. Everyone dressed for the occasion. Each team would have a uniform consisting of a traditional sarong, together with matching T-shirts, proclaiming the name of their village or team. We both entered into the spirit of things and bought a Sarongs to wear and percussion instruments to play on the kite field.



Freedom

Back in the UK we live in a combination of a nanny state and a police state. Out in Bali, we found people with their freedom still intact:

- Although I don't smoke, it felt like a breath of fresh air to find that people were actually allowed to smoke in restaurants.
- Whilst most scooter riders wore helmets, this clearly wasn't compulsory.
- There were no barriers round the kite field. The British requirement for separation was replaced by simple responsibility – if you were knocked over by a kite or a line, it was your fault for being in the way.
- There was a freedom in the press that was surprising. We read a joke where the punchline was that “Wife” stood for “Washing Ironing, fucking etc”. It was glorious to see such political incorrectness.

Culture of Kite Flying

Kite flying is part of the Balinese culture. They fly kites as an offering to the god of rice in an act of thanks for a good harvest. It is wonderful to fly for people that understand kite flying, rather than a western nation which worships a shiny box of electronics in the corner of the room. The Balinese understand and appreciate what is going on. They want to interact and they want to take part. We were never short of a helping hand.

In England, it is unusual to see a kite in the sky – we never see one without remarking on it, but when we drove through the vibrant green rice fields in Bali, we always saw kites in the sky. Often small ones, but occasionally the big ones too. Back home, you never see big display kites outside a kite festival, but in Bali, it was a daily occurrence.

The meaning of colour

As our visit went on, we noticed that many things had specific colours and every colour had a meaning:

The Colours of Bali. All of the local kites were individual, with different striped patterns but they all used the same colours:

- Red. Symbolising birth
- White. The colour for life
- Black. Representing death.

Temple colours. Temples and shrines were wrapped in cloth of white and gold:

- White. For purity
- Gold. The colour of the gods.

Most of the Balinese wore Sarongs with a black and white chequered pattern. Here the black and white represent yin and yang, night and day, the interdependent opposites.

On the kite field, they controlled the hundreds of teams and thousands of fliers with three flags flown from a the bamboo control tower:

- Black: Launch
- Yellow: Keep flying
- Red: Time to land

Local Competition

Over the weekend, there was a competition between the local fliers. They were split into the different categories of kite:

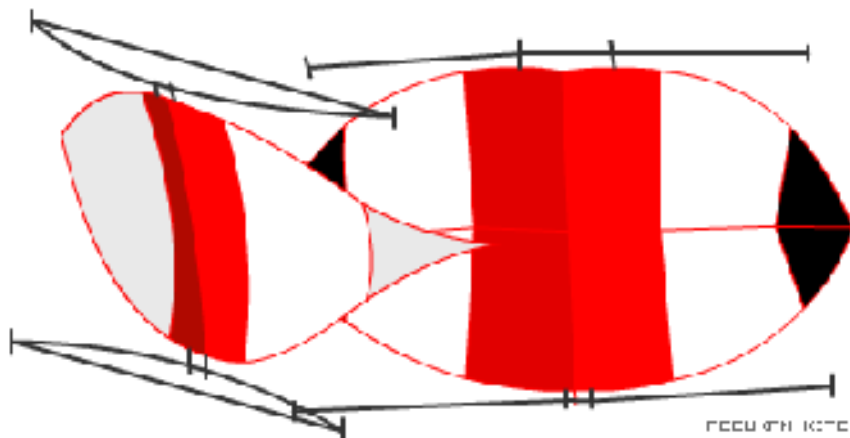
- Bebean. This is a kite in the shape of a stylised fish. Here are three being launched:



- Janggan. This kite is a traditional design that includes a dragon head and a huge tail, snaking for 100 or 200 meters through the sky. They fly them high, with a handful of these beautiful kites together, gracing the sky traditionally representing balance and peace.



- Pecukan. This is as tricky kite to fly. It is on the same huge scale as the other kites but it is unstable like an Indian fighter. We saw a number of them fly and a similar number crash to the ground to the sound of loud cheers from the audience. I don't have a good picture but here is a diagram from the Bali Travel News:



- Creative. In this category, the locals used bamboo and paper mache to create wonderful new shapes:



Note that all of the traditional kites have a pair of hummers, the top one is female and the bottom one is male. Several times during the event I looked round, expecting to see a helicopter in the sky, but always it was the hummer on a kite.

Judging the competition

The Balinese put a lot of effort into their flying and there is competition between the teams to put on the best show. There were over three hundred local kites flown and this was only the cream of the crop – earlier competition had whittled the numbers down so that only the best were in the international event. The judges were looking for many things, including:

- The colours and decoration
- The sound of the hummers and the harmony between the two notes
- Onyah. The sway of the kite. The Bebean in particular is meant to represent a fish, so it is expected to sway with a swimming movement. Not too stable, not too erratic.
- Measurement. The kites must be at least 4m wide.
- The quality of the construction
- The quality and smoothness of the launch and landing. They launch the kites and land them without them touching the ground. As they come down, there is a team ready to catch them and carry them over the rice at head height.
- The spontaneity of the crew. It is difficult to get a team of 20 people to work the line together in co-operation.
- The uniform and general appearance of the crew
- And of course, the quality of the music which accompanies every flight.

Non-kite stuff

The local fliers didn't only build kites. There were lots of other things around, including:

- Scarecrows. Dozens of them from a t-shirt over straw to meticulously crafted papiermache.
- Windmills. These have a wooden propeller near the top of a

bamboo pole, decorated with flags woven from leaves and monkeys made from coconut matting. In the fresh breeze, they spun at a ferocious rate. In the fields they use them to scare off the birds but at close quarters, they spun with a sufficiently menacing noise to make me fear that life and limb might be lost if they broke free.

- Cowbells. Big wooden ones. A whole troop of men carrying them round their necks sounding like an angry army on the warpath.
- Sheltered seats. The functional equivalent of a park bench was a raised, sheltered platform. Raised to keep you out of the insects. Sheltered to keep you out of the sunshine. Open to let the wind blow through. We spent several happy hours relaxing on this one by the pool in the hotel.



- Banners. I'll make a note that next time we can bring banners, just the fabric will do as bamboo banner poles are in plentiful supply. But we liked the traditional ones with flamboyant designs sculpted from leaves tied in loops.
- Decorated trees. The Balinese hold certain trees in reverence

and marked them with chequered fabric both in decoration and to ensure that people didn't injure them in error.

- Outdoor sleeping. The Balinese build their houses behind walls, so you don't get to see how they live, but the one house that we did visit, where they made percussion instruments clearly had a bed that was as good as outdoors, there were no walls, only an open roof to keep the rain off and a curtain round the perimeter of the bed. In other places, we saw mattresses and pillows on the ground where people had clearly been sleeping in the elements. We are pretty sure that the on-site security slept in our bay at the site, which was just a canvas roof and some low, woven fencing.

No words can capture the noise and excitement of the event, but a panorama stitched together from pictures taken from the control tower give a feeling for the number of people involved in the teams, sheltering from the sun under their kites:



And of course, the flying field was mobbed. Here is the Northern corner:



After the Flying, our hosts had organised a banquet. As well as the food, they laid on Balinese theatre:



They told a traditional story but adapted it for local taste, when the young prince was sent out to play, he was sent out to play with a kite, much to the appreciation of the everyone who knew the fable.

On one of the evenings, Kathleen danced with royalty, Drs Rai Girigunadhi, from the palace of Kerambitan:



And Kevin Saunders managed somehow to get picked for erotic dancing with the Balinese girl not once, but twice. Sorry, but the pictures have had to be censored.

After the kite flying, our hosts had arranged a day of sight seeing, so we bundled into three coaches. For a trip through the lush green rice fields.



On board, Kitai Rhee (President of the Korea Kite Flier's Association) and his wife presented Kathleen with an apple. I'm not quite sure of the significance but I don't think they grow apples over there – it certainly felt like a special gift in the context.

First stop was at Luhur Alas Kedaton temple, a place that is known for it's population of monkeys. Kathleen was one of the first off the bus and it was only a matter of a few seconds before a monkey had run over, climbed up to her shoulder and stolen her precious apple. But it wasn't long before she was making friends with them.



Next, we went on to lake Beratan, up in the cool fresh air of the mountains, where lunch was provided. The next stage was to go across the lake by ferry but I saw a speed boat and couldn't resist, six of us made the trip across in style. On the other side of the lake was a beautiful villa resort, nestled just under the towering green wall of the mountainside. The setting was idyllic:



But some of the sculpture left questions unanswered:



Whilst we had seen banana trees all over, this resort was the only place that we found a banana flower:



From there, it was back into the speed boat to cross to Bedugul temple, where they had a traditional percussion band waiting for us.



The temple is set in the tranquillity of the lake and the mountain:



Here we took pictures with the Rhee's (who had forgiven our faux pas with the apple) and the Liannawati's from West Java:



Next on our whistle-stop tour was a short visit to the Kebun Raya Bedugul botanical gardens:



On the way back home, we stopped off at the School of tourism where they teach people how to work in the tourist trade. People here study languages and the service industry. The school includes a small hotel, with a fully fitted reception and a handful of rooms fitted out to full four-star specification. The students who helped us on the kite field, lugging heavy bags, keeping us hydrated with a constant supply of cold drinks and helping to translate where necessary had all come from this school. Wisa Dewa Nyoman stood up and offered an apology for any mistakes that the students might have made, but I was having none of it. Their effort and enthusiasm had been exemplary and I stood up in front of everyone to point this out and to thank them.

On the morning after the bus trip, most people went home, but we were staying on a little longer and took advantage of the pleasant relaxing environment by the pool at the hotel.



We also took the opportunity to see the arch:



And of course, the main temple:



And to say goodbye to our landlord, the owner of the Dewi Sinta hotel and our local friend, Frenky the wood burner:



Frenky had helped to get us out of an embarrassing situation. We had turned up in Bali without any name cards and of course, everyone we met gave us a card. Frenky usually does key fobs

and other nick-knacks but we asked him to burn his pieces of bamboo with out names, email, website and mobile number. These seemed to be appreciated by everyone. Except Kevin, who can't take wood products home to Australia.

Later in that day, we were taken to “Big Expo”, where various manufacturers tried to sell us beautiful furniture that we couldn't possibly take home but where I did pick up a rather nice kimono. On the way back, we passed through the road where Paddy's bar was blown up several years ago. It seems that the Ozzies are a bit soft in the face of terrorism and have been very shy at coming back, but the place was buzzing and I can see every reason to enjoy Bali. There was a big security scare in Heathrow the day after we left but it won't change our plans in the future, we don't see why Bali should be any different. If you let the terrorists change your plans then you only reward them. If anything, our trip to Bali has strengthened our resolve to go to the next Beirut kite festival if Sami is willing to organise one.

Just round the corner was Bali Beach, a beautiful stretch of golden sand. We only stopped for a few minutes but we had no more than stepped on to the shore when a couple of locals came over calling “Mr Andrew”, having recognised us from the kite festival on the other side of the island.

We spent the last day with the School of tourism, being driven round Bali by Kanti, one of the students who had helped us so much on the kite field.

We took the opportunity to photograph more of Bali, such as Petrol for sale in bottles at the road side:



The typical town gates at the entrance to Tanah Lot



The ridiculous loads carried on little scooters:



They took us to a war grave where it felt inappropriate to take pictures but we were impressed by the Banyan tree outside:



Wisa explained that the Banyan tree never dies of old age, it keeps dropping new roots and can spread forever.

I didn't keep good notes, so I don't know the name of the beautiful, peaceful temples that we visited.

He also explained the meaning behind the number of roofs on the pagodas. Always an odd number. 11 for the most revered god and only one for the god of rice. He knew all ranks in between, but I'm not a good student, I don't remember.

We visited the Bali Beach hotel where we could have spent US\$3500 per night but we were happy to return to the excellent accommodation back at the school, where in addition to the first class hotel room, we had a balcony overlooking the rice fields. Our last night was spent with the sound of the wildlife chirping away in the field beneath us, cementing the memory of an outstanding week in beautiful surroundings with wonderful, friendly people.

We would like to thank:

- The council of kite fliers who organised the entire event and ran it with such professionalism
- The hundreds of teams of local fliers who made the event such a spectacle
- The international guests from so many countries who made us welcome both on and off the field
- The staff and pupils of the school of tourism for their tireless and enthusiastic assistance and for looking after us so well on our last day.
- The staff and owner of the Dewi Sinta hotel for making our stay so comfortable
- Frenky for making so many name cards for us
- Kevin Sanders for making us laugh so much and for the picture of us wearing sarongs
- “m.yudistira” on flickr.com for the pictures of the Janggan and “horse and cart” kites.
- Bali Travel News for the diagram of the Pecukan

And we would like to apologize to all the local kite fliers who we cut from the sky!

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