

PASSPORT

WORLD TRAVEL

BALI BY JOSH WILSON

THE PARADISE island has seen better days. Her beautiful face is scabbed over with asphalt and sprawl, the lush and rolling countryside plagued by endless swarms of noisy scooters, vans, tourist-company SUVs and autos of all varieties that spew noxious exhaust into the air.

Amid all the tourist hoo-ha, however, awaits a very ancient land that explodes with vivid detail at every turn, from the lush greenery and heavy blossoms to the filigrees and mythic figures that encrust every available inch of architecture. The aesthetic is dense, ornamented, and full of exotic characters and fabulous animals. From the moment one steps off the plane at Den Passar, there is never any doubt that the stories are different here.

But the economic situation is really lousy, largely thanks to the parasitic reign of President Suharto, who stepped down last year following mass demonstrations and rioting. The coup de grâce awaits delivery as this goes to press, with June 7 elections favoring opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of the Indonesian general Sukarno, who was unseated by Suharto in 1967.

Meanwhile, the cash comes in on planes, and wherever the tourists go, one will find a crush of hustling locals. Arrive at a scenic vista or temple, and within moments you are besieged by folks selling large hand-carved elephants and amazing chess sets done up all Hindu-rococo, often for as little as a dollar. There are ranks of such vendors who simply won't accept "No, thank you."

nickle-and-dimed to death by Germans and Americans and English. This past March 5,000 rupiahs converted to a measly 50 cents. Just pay the difference!

Accommodations, food, and activities are damnably easy to come by. Take a walk down Monkey Forest Road in Ubud, for example, and you'll pass \$5-a-night guest houses and bungalows—all beautifully appointed with typical Balinese attention to detail—among restaurants, boutiques, general stores, and travel agencies by the score. That's where you book your tours of the countryside, the ancient

moss-covered temples that could have been dreamed by Coleridge, and the jungles. Bike rides and white-water rafting are also popular, but many of these tours have a family-oriented approach, which makes things a bit more like an amusement-park ride.

A far less shrink-wrapped experience is a hike with Bali Bird Walks founder Victor Mason, an en-

gaging and cracky English expat deep-fried for 30 years under island sun. Mason leads the expeditions barefoot, through paddies and over crumbling pavement, mossy paving stones, and root-gnarled trails. He's a walking end-of-empire period piece with an earthy sense of humor and an amazing knowledge of local wildlife, narrating the expedition with a constant stream of "bloody this" and "bugger that," erupting with surprise and delight at the merest flick of a feather. Look for the Bali Bird Walks sign outside the Beggar's Bush Restaurant in Ubud.



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These symptoms of economic debasement are apparent everywhere, especially around the population centers, where tourists tend to gather. The Australians and surfers all gravitate toward the coastal cities with their beaches and bars. It's a bit like being at an extended beach party for thirty-something ex-frat-house pals.

Inland, the countryside is jungle and convoluted terrain and rice paddies. The 3,142-meter volcano Mount Agung looms to the north, swathed in fog and rain. In Ubud, Europeans and North Americans line up for nightly gamelan and dance shows, capturing every detail with camcorders and cameras. The bazaars are packed with tourists examining carvings and jewelry and batik sarongs, dickering with the exhausted clerks over a few thousand rupiahs.

Haggling is a part of the Balinese shopping ritual, but in this tourist economy it's just another way that islanders get screwed. First, wholesale vampirism by Suharto, then getting

side the Duggal's Bush Restaurant in Ubud.

One of the big national holidays in Bali is New Year's Eve, which on the Hindu calendar was March 17 and 18 this year. It's a big occasion, especially for the kids—an evening of ceremonies on the street, people in yellow and white, and lots of incense and gamelan music, culminating with a parade of the ogoh-ogohs.

These are huge temple-demon floats done up in comic-book action poses, all googly eyes and big teeth, feet with thumbs, outstretched arms, and huge clawed fingers. The purpose of the ogoh-ogoh is to scare off negative forces; once they're gone, the entire island is shut down for 24 hours, with absolutely no activity outside of the homes and no use of electricity. Hotel guests can't leave their rooms after nightfall, although they can bask all they like in the humid morning, afternoon, and twilight. But leave the compound and you risk a \$100 fine by patrolling gendarmes. It's a good night to look at the tropical sky, velvet black and filled with a myriad glitterings. ■