

Friday 1 June 2001

Gili Trawangan

I'm glad to report that all the travelling has been utterly worth it to get to this astoundingly beautiful and idyllic island.

I'm currently watching the sun go down behind Gunung Rinjani on Lombok from the comfort of my guesthouse with its palm-fringed bungalows. If you can imagine a heaven on earth, this may very well be the picture you have in your mind – a tiny tropical island (2 km x 1 km), free from touts and hawkers, and even motorised traffic. (Horse-drawn transport is the only mode available.)

There are a couple of low-key bars and restaurants on the eastern side of the island, but my hut is on the deserted west where peace and tranquility reign supreme. Even arriving here was wonderful. We came in a wooden boat and had to wade ashore. It is a metaphorical million miles away from Kuta on Bali, but as the bird flies is probably only about 60 or 70 miles away.

In the evening went for a fabulous buffet meal with the Canadians (Christy and Craig) and a drink on my own afterwards, when I met the Irish guy I had previously met in Kuta and who insisted on calling me Andrew. (I saw no reason to disabuse him.)

He was engaged in a very profound conversation with a fellow 40-something: "You know the women in Bali are overrated. I was told they had great breasts but you know they're all the same bloody size. No variety. Not like European girls – they have great tits."

Overwhelmed by the conversation I took my leave. Need sleep for the serious day of sunning myself tomorrow!

Saturday 2 June 2021

It really is lovely here. I woke early courtesy of the morning chorus and went for a walk around the island at 7.

The view from our bungalows in the early morning is stunning: the sea shimmering behind palm fronds in the early morning sun. I slept well too, the sound of the waves breaking 100 metres away is very soporific.

There is a family of cats here, which is just gorgeous – a mother and her four kittens. I watched the young feeding from their mother this morning...it must be a tremendously tiring task for her to produce enough milk for four ravenous kittens.

The sunset was entirely different tonight. Instead of yesterday's diffused spectrum of blues, oranges, golds and yellows, this evening you could see an almost perfect circle of blood-red light descend rapidly into the horizon, rendering the sea an almost phosphorescent range of blues and greens.

Have done nothing particularly of note today: did some laundry, watched [Titanic](#) at a local pub, and just generally relaxed. Not a bad way to spend a day.

Sunday 3 June 2001

Well into the vibe of the Gilis by now. I did virtually nothing here today. Went for a walk early on and a quick swim in the lovely refreshing sea.

In the pm it rained and caught me in the village, so I took refuge in [the Irish pub](#), where I watched 2 films. Six hours later I left for bed and my new book.

A tough day but someone has to spend it that way...

Monday 4 June 2001

A day of relatively high action. After breakfast went into town to catch the glass-bottomed boat tour across the three islands: [Trawangan](#), [Air](#) and [Meno](#). They provide a mask and flippers, so at three different sites we put down anchor and snorkelled.

The visibility was good, and for a first time snorkeller like me, the experience was superb if a little choppy (to the consternation of a poor girl from Yorkshire, who spent most of the trip with her head lolling over the side of the boat).

We saw a range of beautiful fishes (including some particularly vibrant striped and ultraviolet numbers) and even caught a glimpse of a couple of turtles too. And of course there was a bright sea bed collection of corals and starfish and interesting rock formations too.

But the undercurrents were ferociously strong and it sapped your energy just to keep with the boat, so we were all glad to take lunch on Gili Air, which is even more sparsely developed than Trawangan.

A great evening: met up with snorkellers for fantastic fish dinner (red and white snapper and squid) then many cocktails at Irish bar and party at another place.

Bed at 2am: my first late night in a long time.

Tuesday 5 June 2001

Felt pretty raw this morning – I'm definitely getting old.

As for the rest of the day, well if there was any doubt in your mind that I had failed to perfect the art of doing nothing then I can safely assure you that these doubts can now most assuredly be assuaged.

Having risen in pain at 10ish, I repaired again to bed at around 11:30 and slept off last night's sins some more. At 3ish I lolloped into town and compared notes with those who were fighting through the fallout from the night before – some hadn't hit the hay till 6am; others were yet to surface by mid-afternoon; all were ashen-faced.

Luckily Trawangan is set up for such occasions, and I was able to spend the afternoon and evening watching films and gradually rehydrating in the Irish bar, which does a stonking line in hangover food.

Yet to achieve 100% health, I'm off to bed again by 10pm tonight.

Wednesday 6 June 2001

Very much a repeat of yesterday – what I'm coming to know as a “Gili day”.

Just pootled around the island, revelling in its seclusion and beauty. You can imagine great novelists retreating to places like this to conjure up their latest masterpiece. Too bad there isn't a piano here: that would be perfection.

In the evening, bid farewell to the Yorkshire lasses and the English couple I've been hanging around with. I have a feeling they might pop in on me in Melbourne. The Canadians next door also left, so I'm spending the next couple of days gearing up for Australia on my own.

They all had a good send-off though: the Irish bar hosted its weekly quiz. Ferociously difficult questions, and our team did atrociously.

It turned out to be a relief however, as the prize for winning was to consume three shots of tequila and two bananas in quick succession, before dashing to the bathroom to put your underwear Superman-style outside your trousers.

Good craic, as the Irish would say, and I stayed chatting till gone 2am.

Thursday 7 June 2001

Sunset this evening was stupendous. The changing kaleidoscope of colour, common to all dusks, never fails to impress, but what makes it unique here is the landscape that is revealed as the sun goes down.

As it makes its descent, reverting from a searing overhead floodlight to a soft orange uplighter in the space of half an hour, the imposing form of a volcano on Bali becomes visible as a silhouette in front of the diffuse light. It's remarkable to see – by day the volcano is concealed by haze and the reflection of the sun off the water, and only in this half-hour period of the day can it be seen. Beautiful.

Otherwise another “Gili day”, distinguished only by the fact that I attempted to jog around the island. In actuality it was more of a succession of out-of-puff jogs and relieved walks, but I feel less guilty for all the good food now.

Only one more day of this to go before reality bites...

Friday 8 June 2001

I decided to spend my last day here on the Gilis snorkelling off the coast of the island. What an extraordinary way to round things up – there is a ‘cliff’ about 15 metres from the shore, where a quite amazing range and quantity of sea life scavenges for food. There's also a coral garden, which is also a rich resource for fishes.

It was incredible to be so close to the shore and to be able to see such a range of underwater life – countless colourful species of fish, an intriguing pale model with a long snout, and all ensconced in a living environment.

I even saw a stonefish – luckily before I went too near, as the guide book warns that if you come into contact “excruciating pain and sometimes death” befall the unlucky snorkeler.

It was an almost otherworldly experience to swim among such a riot of life and colour – as one passerby succinctly put it, “fucking awesome”.

Saturday 9 June 2001

Well Bali's airport has to be one of the dullest places on Earth. Or maybe it's just the spectre of Kuta and my stolen minidisc player that haunts the place.

Nonetheless I am here 6 hours early for my flight, and there ain't much to do but wait. The allure of Patience has worn off, so I'm itching to get going.

I took the luxury route to get here: the Bounty Cruise, taking two hours rather than 12 the conventional route. But it'll be a relief to escape this place, where nothing EVER has a set price – I think I've been ripped off something rotten today on my taxi transfers etc not to mention an outrageous departure tax at the airport.

Sunday 10 June 2001

Ah the joys of the Western world! Sydney airport is modern, lively, free of hawkers – quite a contrast.

We arrived in good time after an excruciatingly uncomfortable flight. They ought to rename economy “contortionist class”. But the excitement of being in Oz carried me through, and within half an hour I was in town and sniffing out the caffeine.

I found it in the most beautiful surroundings – overlooking the much fêted Opera House and Harbour Bridge, both of which didn't disappoint. They form the area of a really stunning harbour setting, which I soaked in over my first really good cappuccino in many a long week.

Faced with 12 hours to spend before my train to Sydney, but with very little energy to spare, I wandered around the CBD and Hyde Park for a while before retreating to the comfort of a handy cinema.

I think I'll save the real sights of Sydney for my proper visit in three months' time or so.

Monday 11 June 2001

Melbourne, Australia

Another night of arduous travel and disturbed sleep on the train and finally I reached Melbourne, which I hope to call home for the next three months.

First impressions: it's a lot like Chicago. Far smaller of course but the same kind of grid streets and juxtaposition of early and late 20th century architecture.

If history repeats itself, and first impressions last, then I think I'll be happy here.

I spent the day exploring the CBD, with its trams and shopping malls – it feels like a real working city, although today was a bad example, it being a Bank Holiday.

I went on the trail of good European food in the evening – up to Carlton, an inner city suburb that is a sprawl of cafés and restaurants, with people eating on tables set out on the street (funny kind of ‘winter’ they have here!)

Mindful of my rapidly diminishing stock of dollars, I opted for a delicious takeaway souvlaki – fresh lettuce! pita bread! A joy. Ditto the cheap bottle of plonk I bought from a nearby bottle-shop and proceeded to consume in front of the TV for the rest of the evening.

Tuesday 12 June 2001

A day of achievement. I spent the morning dealing with the various logistics of becoming a legal worker here: tax office, Medicare registration, bank account. I also enrolled with a job agency, which came up trumps immediately: I have my first interview tomorrow afternoon. So I generally felt pretty smug and rewarded myself by joining the local Starbucks clone's loyalty scheme. (I'm beginning to feel at home already)

I met up with my old travelling buddies Dawn and Ali in the evening, and we shared stories of the past couple of months over yet another souvlaki feast. The evening continued in the Hard Rock Café, where I had my first shot at Australian beer, although not the legendary [VB](#) which will have to wait til another day.

But we had a nice evening catching up and listening to quite a good duo with guitars and good voices – quite a change from the Asian cat-strangling, which is standard in Indonesia's less well-heeled establishments.

Wednesday 13 June 2001

Another day of action. I had to buy myself some suitable interview clothes in the morning (it feels very odd to be back in a shirt and tie!) before catching the tram to South Melbourne for my interview.

Of course I got the wrong tram so it was just as well that I went early as a half hour walk awaited me at the other end. Spent an hour or so filling in the interminable forms for agency work only to discover that the jobs I was going for have been withdrawn. Still at least I'm on the books now.

Afternoon concluded by buying a mobile phone – not exactly a budget measure, but apparently essential for head huntees like myself.

Met Dawn and Ali at the vast, garish and astonishingly packed casino/entertainment complex. They went to see [Pearl Harbour](#), I to see [Moulin Rouge](#), which is a wonderfully inventive and romantic film.

After the film we watched the incredibly gaudy spectacle of the multimedia, all-singing, all-dancing hotel lobby at [Crown](#) – a ridiculously OTT show of water, light and music. And I thought this was Melbourne, not Las Vegas...

Thursday 14 June 2001

Started the day at the amazing [Queen Victoria Market](#), which is full of clothes, watches, etc. And then I discovered the food section – wow!

From rows and rows of fresh vegetables and fruit, to a hall full of meats and charcuterie, to a section composed entirely of olives, Greek dips and bakeries, it was a very welcome assault on the senses, and I stocked up on cheap provisions for the week ahead.

A week which looks to be shaping up as one of desperately trying to find work and somewhere to live...

Tuesday 19 June 2001

Well, reality as we all know bites, and as I now know, has sunk its teeth into me here in Melbourne.

I am still staying at a hostel; I have not found myself a nice yet cheap loft conversion to share with three other fantastic flatmates.

I am still a job-free zone; I have not found employment in a gorgeous little café, writing restaurant reviews for [The Age](#) as a sideline.

But never mind, something WILL come along.

Meanwhile I continue to explore Melbourne by day and often unsuccessfully resist the temptation to go and see Moulin Rouge at the cinema again (I'm a pathological romantic.)

Ticked off my lists of sights to see are: the trendy inner suburbs, the [tennis centre](#), the garish [Arts Centre](#), the seaside resort of [St Kilda](#), the [botanic gardens](#)...all of which reinforced my impression of Melbourne as a very nice place to live.

Let's hope I can find some means of living here then...

Wednesday 20 June 2001

More of the dreadful job hunting – there must be more copies of my CV in circulation in Melbourne than there are of the Bible. Surely SOMEONE will call me?!

Apart from that drudgery, went to the [Melbourne Museum](#) in [Carlton Gardens](#) today – a very kitch affair, which only opened last year. I also went to the same piano shop I've been going to for the past week and had a much needed tinkle on the old ivories. I'd better find a new place otherwise they'll think I'm trying to nick a Steinway or something.

My resolve to economise by not eating out and drinking any alcohol at all was tested and completely evaporated in the evening, when I ended up staying out until 2am. But it was a great evening – we stumbled across an improvisational comedy performance in one bar, and quite a good live band in another, and of course the legendary Victorian Bitter never fails to please.

Friday 22 June 2001

One of my most humiliating experiences is today's highlight, readers.

It all began on the job hunt trail, this time in trendy [Lygon St](#) where there are a million cafés and restaurants. At 4pm I struck gold: a nice Italian restaurant, who said they could give me a waitering trial that evening at 6pm.

Of course I had to embellish my waitering experience (in reality: zero) but everyone does that right?

So I dashed back to the hostel, washed and ironed my white shirt, and then zoomed out again to the restaurant. The first couple of hours were fine, and I took drinks orders and cleared plates like pro.

But then all hell broke loose. I was assigned to a table of 32, with just one other waitress, who happened to disappear off to the loo just as the masses decided to order. So I took their orders, restraining my sense of imminent panic and disaster, and repaired to the kitchen to hand in the order, for which I received an instant and unanimous bollocking because my writing was illegible.

Well it was a comedy of errors henceforth...comedy with hindsight, of course, all quite embarrassing at the time. But at least I've been able to refine my career choice a little: I shan't be waitering, that's for sure.

Tuesday 26 June 2001

The last 24 hours have been a good example of why I like being cities in general and Melbourne in particular.

Last night went to the Improvmon comedy show – much like last week's but with members of the public giving it a shot too. The highlight was an inspired mime to a duet called “The Last Duet” – very funny take on ABBA-esque dance moves, and a definite dig at the likes of “Up Where We Belong” and “Endless Love”.

Then today I was just job seeking in one of the city centre shopping malls when I stumbled across a truly fantastic school big band giving a performance – Chattanooga Choo Choo et al. Excellent stuff.

Intended to get a good night's sleep but that was all thrown off course when an exceptionally drunk and rather portly American installed himself in the bunk above me and instantly fell sound asleep, no doubt concussed by the proximity to his extraordinarily loud snoring and narco-gurgling.

For the rest of us it was like torture by toilet plunger, pneumatic drill and worst of all, the awful anticipation – has he stopped snoring or is this a temporary lapse? kind of thing.

Friday 29 June 2001

Well finally things are falling into place. Still no job, but I've struck gold on the accommodation. I'm now ensconced in a magnificent warehouse conversion house with seven other backpackers.

It's beautiful: all wooden floors and brick walls, and there's even a rooftop balcony for those springtime breakfasts!

My flatmates all seem very friendly, so generally I'm pretty pleased. The area is good too: trams run right outside, there are plenty of shops and cafés, and Brunswick Street is just a stone's throw away.

It's so nice to be able just to put my things down and not worry about them going walkies, not to mention the creature comforts of a TV and properly kitted out kitchen. Gloat, gloat!

Evening was a biggie. Viki took me out to dinner – her last night and her dad was paying, so we headed to a fantastic and very posh Indian, laden with three bottles of BYO wine (waiter was horrified!). Delicious food: tandoori mushrooms, raita, sag aloo, curry, rice, naan...not a bit gluttonous.

Left three hours later, very full and very drunk. Headed to [PJ's pub](#) where James works for great retro night with live band and much dancing. Then onto the Roo Bar at Bakpak for pool and beers. I staggered home at 2.30am.

Saturday 30 June 2001

Whole household hungover this am. Very nice to spend the whole day recounting the night before and generally hanging around the house.

In the evening, watched the Lions win and then some tennis. Party going on over the road, with guys throwing firesticks on the street – you don't see that every day.

We watched from the balcony and it was like a private circus.