

## Tuesday 1 May 2001

Jack's final day, heralded in true style by a motley collection of hangovers.

Spent the day traipsing around the shops in Central and Kowloon – Jack's search for a cheap digital camera needed to be concluded.

Despite my good intentions not to drink, when the beer was thrust into my hand, it somehow found a way down my throat. We watched [Road Trip](#) – VERY funny film! – and in not time at all, we were pretty much steaming drunk again. Shock, horror.

Jack checked in at the ultra-modern in-town airport check-in, and we got the ferry over to [Discovery Bay](#) on [Lantau](#) for more drinks. We packaged Jack off on the bus with just 30 minutes to spare, and Martin and I kept on boozin'.

We didn't get back til' gone 4am, all the while having what I'm sure were meaningful and profound conversations about life, the universe and everything. I think I need to dry out...

## Wednesday 2 May 2001

Mindful of my recent absence of culture (apart from pub culture, that is) I decided today to do some museum-hopping.

First, I trekked out to [Kowloon Park](#), which is an interesting place that blends modern artifice with nature. There's a display of sculptures there too – it's all very Hong Kong.

Then I went to the [Science Museum](#), which has a terrific Willy Wonka-style exhibit whose sole purpose is to shuttle plastic globes around a fascinating, 3-storeyed maze of steel causeways and gravity-defying or musical or just bizarre-looking contraptions. Hard to explain, but revived the kid in me.

Unfortunately, the [HK Museum of History](#) is being renovated, so had to give that one a miss.

With both Martin and I still feeling a little jaded, we decided to spend the evening in a cinema – [Woody Allen](#) film, [Small Time Crooks](#).

## Thursday 3 May 2001

Well I'm now on a Chinese overnight train en route to Shanghai. And I have to say it's quite an experience – although not at all in the same sense as my Thai overnighter was!

This time, I've gone for the luxurious 'soft sleeper' option (at a cost of £80 as opposed to Thai 3<sup>rd</sup> class £4) and it's very civilised. I'm in a 4-bed cabin (but the other berths are empty, so it's actually private!) that is decked out in velour and lace and white linen.

There's air con, piped (but adjustable!) music, personal reading lights, a red rose on the bedside table (a subtle Communist touch, I wonder?), plush carpet on the floor and enough little cubby holes for my belongings to keep me entertained for hours.

Which is just as well, since I get to spend 28 of them here! Oh joy.

**Friday 4 May 2001**

**Shanghai**

Not a good day – always a shame when you're in a new place, but never mind. The rest of the train journey was fine – slept like a log mostly.

We got to Shanghai around 6pm, and arrived into general chaos – thousands of people milling about the station. I battled my way through the masses into the open air, where the people-traffic was accompanied by car-traffic in equal quantities.

After getting some cash, I eventually found my way to the metro – again battling through the crowds – only to be faced with all-Chinese maps.

Figured it out after a while though, and soon was whizzing off to **the Bund**, with various Chinese staring at me and laughing along the way (do the HAVE to do that!?)

Any visions I had of an easy transition from train to bed evaporated entirely when I emerged from the station to find **Nanjing Lu** and the Bund absolutely throbbing with crowds – unbeknownst to me, I had arrived on a public holiday!

If I hadn't been carrying the equivalent of 3 baby hippos on my back, I'm sure this would have been an enjoyable spectacle – families and friends in party mood in front of the Shanghai skyline, which was lit by powerful searchlights.

But, to be honest, it was my worst nightmare. But the fun was only just beginning.

After about ¾ hour's walk I finally reached the [Pujiang Hotel](#), which the guidebook recommends as being the only backpacker choice in Shanghai. Guess what...full!

To cut a VERY long story short, this was the story across town – and it took 3 hours of walking avec backpack to discover this.

I finally took the only room I could find – and it's setting me back over £30 a night. On the plus side, it is pretty nice – all marble and uplighting – and is at least on Shanghai's list of protected buildings.

You won't be surprised to learn that it didn't take me long to make use of my new-found lodgings...

### **Saturday 5 May 2001**

Woke up obscenely late and with very sore legs from yesterday's marathon, but determined to abandon my negative first impressions of Shanghai, got up and put shorts and t-shirt on, ready to face the day.

Oops. It was pissing down – and cold. Shanghai, how I am coming to love thee!

So I returned to my room, donned jeans and a raincoat, and reevaluated my plans – walking tours were now out of the question.

I've ended up doing the museum circuit – first of all the [Urban Planning Exhibition Hall](#), which showcases the Shanghai of the past and future by way of various technological gimmicks. Just up my geeky street, in other words, and it was especially interesting to see how the [Pudong](#) area has developed in only 10 years – from marshland to skyscraper forest in a decade isn't bad going.

Next up, the [Shanghai Museum](#) itself, which turned out to be a mammoth task of understanding for a Westerner like me – it's not just the language, but the whole cultural context (or paradigm) that is practically incomprehensible. Still, some of the artefacts were incredible to even British eyes – the bronzes, jades and more Ming vases than you can throw a stick at (To my eye, Qing in much more desirable, dahling) dating back as far as 3,600 BC were highlights.

With the weather still British-style, I then succumbed to my skyscraper fetish and made my way over to the [Jinmao Tower](#) on Pudong – the 3<sup>rd</sup> tallest in the world at this time. (Although Shanghai is already planning the tallest.)

This means that as at May 4<sup>th</sup> 2001, I have visited 9 of the 10 tallest towers! It scares me to admit that this figure makes me feel proud:

- 1) [Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur](#)
- 2) [Sears Tower, Chicago](#)
- 3) [Jin Mao Tower, Shanghai](#)
- 4) [World Trade Center, New York](#)
- 5) [Empire State Building, New York](#)
- 6) [Central Plaza, Hong Kong](#)
- 7) [Bank of China Tower, Hong Kong](#)
- 8) [K&C Tower, Kaohsiung](#)
- 9) [Amoco Building, Chicago](#)
- 10) [John Hancock Center, Chicago](#)

I also succumbed to a coffee in the [Grand Hyatt Hotel](#) (cheaper than going to the Observatory!) which was a true luxury.

On the way home, I took the [Bund Tourist Tunnel](#), expecting it to be a simple underpass. How wrong could I have been? It's actually a series of bubble cars that transports you through a tunnel lined with electric lights and lasers accompanied by a dancey soundtrack. Gloriously tacky!

### **Sunday 6 May 2001**

*Fantastic signage: at a wheelchair ramp, under the wheelchair symbol: TRAFFIC LAN FOR DEFROMED MAN.*

Well, Shanghai continues to surprise and delight. I moved today from the [Metropole](#) (RIP – the place was great; my own TV!) to the cheapie [Pujiang Hotel](#).

From one 1930s relic to another – the Pujiang has a wonderful history: in a previous life it was Shanghai's first hotel, and was blessed with the city's inaugural electric light! The dorm is at the end of an atmospheric, wooden-floored and very long corridor – feels like I'm in a black and white film.

Anyhow, after moving I took a complete change by travelling out to the new area of town – [Pudong](#). I went to [Century Park](#), Shanghai's answer to NYC's Central Park. But since it's only 10 years old, the place has eerily small trees and shiny, new-looking benches etc.

It's also vast, and was full of Chinese going about their Sunday business – taking photos.

I then made my way down Century Avenue – a hugely wide and long road that reveals in full glory the youthfully planned nature of this part of town. It was a fascinated exposé of a city in its very early stages of maturity – sort of like Canary

Wharf a few years ago, but without even the small infrastructure that existed there then.

In 20 years, this place will be astounding.

One stop on my walk was **Newage** – China’s biggest department store, and second in the world only to NYC’s Macy’s. Sure enough, it was vast.

Evening spent traipsing down the Bund and Nanjing Dong Lu, trying to ignore the blisters that are rapidly forming on my feet, unused to they are to being sheathed in a pair of socks!

### **Monday 7 May 2001**

I worry that I’m an artistic philistine.

Today I went to the **Shanghai Art Museum** (housed in a glorious colonial building on **Renmin Square**) to see a Dali exhibition, plus their permanent exhibitions of paintings and photography. And much as I can look and think “Oh that’s nice”, I can’t sit for hours, absorbed in the textures et al.

But I suppose that I can listen to a single piece of music 100 times and still find something new and interesting.

One thing I definitely am is a sucker for architecture, and I spent an hour marvelling at the external and internal artistry of the **Grand Theatre**, an incredible steel and glass edifice inside of which is a fabulously opulent 1,800-seat auditorium. I had a guided tour, which also involved a display of thoroughly alien Chinese musical instruments and seeing a ballet class in progress. All very enlightening.

Returning in the evening for a concert was exciting – lit up, the building was even more spectacular. As live music usually is, the concert was lovely, especially the pianist’s 3 (three!) encores, which included one of my favourite Rachmaninovs.

But I have to say (through clenched teeth) that my enjoyment was more than a little impeded by the cacophony created by an impromptu 1,800-strong chorus of mumblers and titterers and coughers, not to mention the additional percussion section of boiled-sweet wrapper rustlers.

SO annoying, but it has inspired me to write a piece of music. Called “Disconcerto for Audience”, it will feature all of the above, plus camera motors, a variety of objects being dropped on the floor, zips, Velcro, the occasional choked “hoik” of phlegm, and every now and again, a strain of beautiful music from the orchestra!

**Tuesday 8 May 2001**

Spent the day in the **French Concession** area, starting off in the new **Xintiandi** complex, a trendy renovated collection of traditional Shanghainese **shikumens**, the unique East meets West style of Shanghai housing, that now boasts all manner of cafes and expensive boutiques.

Interesting gauge of Shanghai's current rejuvenation.

Then strolled around the leafy streets – half close your eyes, and you could be in Paris. **Fuxing Park** is a lovely haunt, and even the sun put in an appearance.

I ended up on **Hengshan Avenue**, which is justifiably described as the Champs-Élysées of the East, bursting as it is with trendy shops and eateries. So I took advantage and had a great Shanghainese lunch – the dumplings and spring rolls and exceptionally fine.

Refreshed, I continued my trek along the streets of the French Concession, stopping off to admire the lobbies of 5\* hotels and the view from the 41<sup>st</sup> floor of the **jinjiang Tower**, which is reached in an all-glass lift!

I was soon in the heart of chic-shopping Shanghai, where two astoundingly enormous glitzy shopping centres have just opened, each at least 2/3 full of shops already. It makes you think when is this building frenzy going to reach its saturation point?

**Wednesday 9 May 2001**

I seem to remember having a rant about sharing a dorm with other people in KL – that time is here again, chaps. The place I'm in now, for all its architectural nobility, has all the atmosphere of a morgue. Walking into the room is like going into a church on the day of a funeral.

There's only one bathroom for at least 12 of us, so that doesn't help matters, and is made worse by the fact that we seem to have some sort of grim reaper staying in the room. He looms around midnight – always the last to retire – and spends at least an hour derobing and preparing himself for his coffin.

In the mornings, he spends at least an hour in the one and only bathroom and receives calls on his mobile phone that rings and disturbs us all from our peacetrul morning routine.

I have a disturbing but recurrent fantasy of walking up to him as he fusses in his locker for the tenth time in an hour, and saying “Are you certified with obsessive compulsive disorder, or shall I do it for you now?” Then he gives some sonorous retort before I punch his lights out, receive a smattering of applause from my co-dormspeople, and retire satisfied to bed. I’m quite obviously losing it.

Anyway, now that’s out of my system, on with the day, which starts in the splendid surroundings of the [HSBC Building](#) – the Bund’s grandest offering. There’s now a coffee shop, which overlooks the central court, and it’s quite easy to imagine the building abuzz with 1930s suits.

A short walk later, and I was enjoying a complete contrast – [Shanghai’s Old Town](#), the most traditional area of the city that has been renovated (surprise) for tourists. Something of a pity, since the place is a little like Disney meets China, but it’s quite a nice reminder of pre-colonial Shanghai.

I had some delicious street snacks there, before heading off on various tangents to see a variety of markets – antiques, produce and animals. All were as authentic as you can get, with bikes laden with goods weaving amongst the crowds.

I took advantage of my first and only truly clear day in Shanghai in very different surrounds – in the [bar on the top \(87<sup>th</sup>\) floor of the Grand Hyatt](#). They just happened to have my very favourite Australian wine, so I celebrated with 2 glasses in the most elegant and thrilling bar I think I’ve ever been to.

The view was inspirational, and the banks of blue searchlights that illuminate Pudong seemed to have been put there just for the benefit of Hyatt guests. I suppose it’s not impossible that they were.

After putting the exorbitant bill on my Visa card (think about it later...) I ventured to the 85<sup>th</sup> floor, where the astonishing atrium – Asia’s highest at 33 storeys – and the strains of piano music floating up it from the 54<sup>th</sup> floor bar gave me a wonderful send-off from this most endearing of cities.

### **Thursday 10 May 2001**

Well, I spoke too bloody soon, didn’t I? Fate just didn’t feel like letting the sophistication of the Grand Hyatt and the glorious walk back along the Bund be my final impressions of Shanghai.

That was down to the Pujiang Hotel, which came up trumps, for the grim reaper was usurped from his position of chief freak last night by a newcomer who stomped in at midnight just as the rest of us were dropping off.

He then proceeded – no joke – to shower loudly, give himself some sort of Swedish massage that involved lots of self-flagellation (I think that's a charitable interpretation...) and then emerge from the bathroom to reveal that this whole routine had been conducted fully clothed! Every step he took – and he took many during the night – sounded like he was fell-walking.

Maybe it's just as well I'm escaping Shanghai today – my sanity is most definitely at risk here.

**Friday 11 May 2001**

**Guangzhou**

*Fab sign on bathroom door: BATHROOM. NO PISSING, SHITTING.*

Very smooth arrival in Guangzhou – as a Brit, it always amazes me when ANY train arrives on time. Transferred onto the very shiny and new metro and was once again plummeted into Chinese-character land.

But I eventually made it to **Shamian Island**, which turns out to be a beautiful haven of tree-lined boulevards within a fairly grotty, industrial city. I took a stroll into town after settling in, and the place seems to be a few years behind Shanghai in terms of developments, but there are areas where things are obviously happening.

But overall it's a much less touristy affair than Shanghai – probably because there isn't all that much to see.

I met up with a Dutch guy called Tom, and we decided to 'have a few drinks' – at 35p a large bottle of **Tsing Tao** beer, it turned into a lot of drinks, and it was a very pleasant evening of the usual talking bollocks and arguing about music/education/politics.

**Saturday 12 May 2001**

Didn't feel too hot today (!) so all sight-seeing notions went out of the window in favour of lounging about in the parks of the island, which was a lovely experience in itself really.

Met a Dutch girl in the evening, and we went for Cantonese meal in an incredibly noisy and smoky restaurant – as the only blue-eyed foreigners, we attracted quite a bit of intrigue. But the meal was delicious.

Rest of the evening spent at **Lucy's Bar** playing 'guess the nationality' (most turned out to be wealthy Americans).

**Sunday 13 May 2001**

Well I must have walked 10 miles at least today and I'm absolutely exhausted!

Went to the [Guangdong Museum of Art](#) – fabulous exhibition of Québécois posters (!) and Tibetan photography, but otherwise quite dour Chinese archaeological finds.

But the walk was interesting – through Guangzhou's varying districts: financial, expat housing (leafy, quiet), local housing (shabby apartment buildings with masses of laundry hanging out from their balconies). All in glorious sunshine – very pleasant.

Forgot to mention yesterday: went to [Qingping market](#), which was the first private market in China (Deng Xiaoping's idea). It's quite an experience – a succession of herbs and spices, live seafood, vegetables and poor little cats and dogs squeezed into cages on top of each other...not for the hypersensitive! I wonder what the Chinese would think of MC Britons throwing themselves under lorries in protest at the veal trade – not very much, I should imagine!

Evening spent feeling fairly ropey – I seem to have picked up the ubiquitous Chinese sniffles – but 'treating' it with Irish coffee @ Lucy's. Since I had to be early for the bus, made effort to go to bed early – this time in a full (8 person) dorm.

And here begins a terrible tale...

The room was constituted of 1 American, 1 Canadian, myself, 3 Dutch and 2 Japanese – a good multicultural mix. Anyhow, the Canadian (moustache, peak cap, mid-30s, slow drawly accent, dull as fuck) had been boring us all throughout the day, moaning about how he thought the Chinese were so rude and hated him because he had a North American accent.

Well, we all hated him by the morning...have you ever shared a room with a manic depressive, paranoid schizophrenic? Because I have.

I was woken at 4am by the guy talking incessantly about the 'fuckin' Chinese' (barbarians) and the 'fuckin' Americans' (arrogant megalomaniacs) and the 'fuckin' English' (outdated, clueless snobs) and the 'fuckin' Japanese' (unfriendly). It wasn't a delicate and diplomatic political commentary, that's for sure.

And then he got up and stomped about while the other members of the dorm (especially a melodramatic fool like me) wondered whether he was a mass murderer and so kept our lips sealed.

Three hours later, this was still going on and there was a certain quality of rattiness about the air that I hope never to encounter again.

If there are unwritten rules about dormitory conduct, he broke every one of them (including the golden rule: NEVER turn on the main light when everyone's asleep). Argh.

**Monday 14 May 2001**

**Macau**

I am currently sitting on the most luxurious coach I've ever been on – another of China's treasure trove of surprises – that is helping ease the pain of last night's debacle. En route to Macau, I am praying that my friend from last night, in his bid to escape China ASAP, chose Hong Kong rather than Macau as his sanctuary.

Well Macau is great – it really feels like a little chunk of Europe (specifically, Portugal). The streets are lined with buildings painted in pastel shades, street and bus signage is Roman as well as Chinese script, and there is a treasure trove of grape-based beverages at easy disposal!

Since I have only a day and a half here, I quickly launched into a hectic sightseeing mission, after checking into my characterful (read 'grotty') guesthouse.

The fact that the whole territory covers a shade under 24 sq km of land certainly helps on the sightseeing front, but not my sense of direction – after the obligatory hour-long diversion as I took a succession of wrong turns and buses, I finally got down to some museum-hopping: the unexpectedly fascinating maritime museum, the expectedly dull Grand Prix museum, and the free wine at the Museo do Vinho.

Also took in a stroll along the waterfront before having my first Euro-style meal (3 courses, coffee, wine) in weeks – extraordinary to think that only 160km or so away in Guangzhou, this is a totally alien concept.

Later on I did the other thing that people do in Macau – went to a casino. I've never understood the compulsion to gamble (perhaps because my luck at games is famously bad) and going to the Lisboa Casino, reputedly Macau's finest, shed no light on the matter. Why do people want to lose money in a smoke- and crowd-filled windowless atmosphere where no-one seems to be enjoying themselves?

At least in Las Vegas there's oodles of kitsch to enjoy. Hell, even in Great Yarmouth you get the odd person with an ear or nose hanging off to keep you entertained.

In Macau it's just robotic. I promptly lost £3 on the slot machines.

## Tuesday 15 May 2001

Well, another action-packed day. I had well-intentionally set my alarm for 9, but of course didn't actually get up til 10, by which time the sun was already burning pretty hot.

My first sortie of the day was to the magnificent [Ruinos de San Paolas](#) – the façade of an old cathedral, which stands majestically atop a hill. The [Macau Museum](#) was also nearby, and was an interesting collection of Macanese streets from the territory's heyday.

Then it was off on a bus to [Taipa Island](#), where I spent half an hour walking the wrong way – away from the Portuguese village I had wanted to see. When I finally did get there, though, I found a wonderfully restored promenade of 5 1920s houses and a pretty little library building and chapel – a piece of Portugal that had been constructed to keep Macau's ruling elite happy.

I spent the rest of the evening in the Macau library, reading a decent newspaper ([S. China Morning Post](#)) – a relief after the shocking banal [China Daily](#) (all 8 pages of it) that I had picked up in Guangzhou.

Spoiled myself in the evening in a lovely 'Mediterasian' restaurant – ate great pizza under swishing ceiling fans to complete my Euro-break.

Just before bed, headed up to the Ruinas again for the night view – a fittingly picturesque finale to my whistlestop tour of Macau.

## Wednesday 16 May 2001

### [Jakarta, Indonesia](#)

Well today was one of marvelling at Asian efficiency and service. After getting the bus from my guesthouse to the ferry terminal in Macau, I had a wander around this implausibly large and modern facility – for such a tiny place, extraordinary.

Then onto the boat itself – a miraculous contraption called a [jetfoil](#), which travels at high speed courtesy of its ability to 'hover' and 2 enormous jet engines!

In just over an hour, I was back in Hong Kong and it was a short walk to the ultra-convenient in-town check-in service.

Time for a quick coffee before the [Airport Express](#) train whisked me across town to HK's vast airport.

Easy transfer onto my Singapore-bound plane, where I enjoyed the legendary service of [Singapore Airlines](#) – champagne, good food, excellent entertainment. (Sexy stewardesses too!)

[Singapore Airport](#) was an utter pleasure to transit through – a model of calm and efficiency – and then it was back onto a SIA plane for the short hop to Jakarta.

Asia is truly an extraordinary place – such modern efficiency mixed in with chronically backward poverty and hardship in such a small area is fascinating to a European, I think.

What I'm looking forward to about escaping to one of these 'less developed' countries is that people are reputedly more friendly – HK, Shanghai and Macau (in descending order) are noticeable for their rudeness/brevity.

Jakarta Airport was surprisingly hassle-free, as was the taxi journey to Charles' hotel. What a place! 5\* luxury etc etc. So I had a shower and left some stuff in his room before we headed out (via a short tour of the 6 tennis courts and pool area!) to find a place more suited to my budget.

What a contrast - £1.50 gets me a black hole of Jakarta, quite a step down from the [Grand Hyatt](#). But I can't complain – it's SO cheap and on a strip of bars and restaurants, so quite lively.

After dumping my stuff, we headed off to a nearby bar for dinner and live music – the strains of Whitney Houston as performed by an Asian, nasal, and crystal-shatteringly high voice were something to behold.

But we met up with some of Charlie's friends and headed off in his chauffeur-driven car to a smarter place, where a fantastic black American band were performing.

Many drinks and much dancing later, it had somehow become 1.30am so we all headed back – them to their luxury suites; me to my hovel!

**Thursday 17 May 2001**

Bloody awful night's sleep courtesy of a) oncoming hangover, b) sleeping in a humid, windowless, sweltering coffin of a room and c) the Muslim call to prayer at 4.20am.

Consequently, I missed the morning entirely and emerged after noon to find the temperature around 36 degrees and the humidity absolutely sky-rocketing. Not to be put off, I headed for [Merdeka Square](#), where [Soekarno's](#) phallic [National Monument](#) stands.

I met a local who informed me that the monument represents Soekarno's "final erection", and sure enough it is a monolithic, gleaming column that emerges from a circular, ring-like building at the base. Go figure.

My new guide also showed me around the nearby [mosque](#), which is vast (capacity: 250,000). He grilled me on Muslim symbology, relentlessly exposing my shocking ignorance of all things religious, so I was relieved to pay him the obligatory "tip" and head off for some a/c comfort at the local shopping mall.

Had a quiet evening in preparation for tomorrow night (Friday night on the town with the expats). People are so friendly and interested here – my waitress struck up a conversation, asking me about where I was from. She come from [Jogja](#) and gave me the name of a hotel to stay at – it's incredibly nice to experience such generosity of spirit, especially after China, where the mentality is very different.

I was asked to be a model too today, so am feeling very chuffed!

### **Friday 18 May 2001**

Woke up to foul weather, so abandoned my plan to go to the historical part of the city in favour of cheap shopping.

It took an hour in a cab, driving through torrential rain, to reach the shopping district, but it was well worth it – I bought a pair of trainers, jeans and shorts, all at stupidly low prices. Then I wet for a great massage at [the Hotel Indonesia](#) – it's not a bad experience, being pummelled and manipulated by able Indonesian hands. Not bad at all.

I also experienced a lot of the hospitable nature that Indonesians are renowned for – I must have struck up conversation wit at least 3 or 4 people today. (One told me I look like Prince William!)

It makes quiet a change from China, where people just kind of stare at you suspiciously, and England, where British reserve forbids you to randomly strike up conversation.

Speaking of British reserve, I found myself a plentiful supplier this evening. Friday night: I had forgotten the significance of that magical phrase to those of us who AREN'T on a year-long holiday!

But I was reminded tonight as Charlie and his colleagues celebrated the end of the week in Jakarta style. There isn't a way to put this without sounding anecdotal, but for the record: Hard Rock Café, 5\* local with live band (I paid for the small round and almost died of shock; Mr. Anderson took care of the rest); Jakarta's first night club, complete with hookers ("anything goes" was the advice given...); another night club, where we met and solicited free goodies from the owner.

I can't believe the direction my life takes sometimes...4.10am, only 10 minutes til the call to prayer, and I'm only just getting to bed! Oh joy!

Anyway, my Englishness was painfully obvious all evening – I'm certainly not used to some of the 'entertainment' on offer, and though I tried to hid, the startled fawn expression (think George W. Bush) was probably rarely off my face.

### **Saturday 19 May 2001**

Strangely enough, I didn't emerge from my cell until 2pm today!

But I slept very well, and gladly report that my body didn't protest too much at last night's treatment.

The weather was great today, so I just sort of mooched about all day, reading the papers. I am DETERMINED to actually see something of cultural Jakarta tomorrow!

Well, what funny things grow out of nothing! Tonight I found myself in the Grand Hyatt – a budgetary manoeuvre, I assured myself, since it was BOGOF all night in the Irish bar.

It turned into a great unexpected night – there was a fabulous close harmony black band who had a repertoire ranging from soul to R'n'B to Latin American. Great stuff, and I met some interesting and friendly people too, who were keen to dance the night away.

It no time at all it's 12.30am and the night has passed in a happy blur.

### **Sunday 20 May 2001**

Well today I actually did make it to [Kota](#). Braved a local bus – Rp700/under 5p! – and the traffic to get to the old Dutch centre of the city. It's all looking a bit neglected these days – sad consequence of the economic turmoil I suppose.

I visited the rather dour [History](#) and [Craft](#) Museums before popping into [Café Batavia](#), the trendy place to be seen in Jkt. It's a haven of jazz and sophistication (was rated by [Newsweek](#) magazine as one of the world's best bars in '94 and '96) in an otherwise rather depressed area – this seems to be the essence of Jkt in 2001.

Took a stroll down to the docks after a delicious glass of fruit punch, and spent the time a) warding off the “How are you?!” touts en masse, b) marvelling at just how foul-smelling and effluence runs through the city in the form of its canals, c) exploring the local markets and the historic shipyard, which has probably not really changed for centuries.

I chickened out and took an a/c bus back to [Jl. Thamrin](#) (a shocking outlay of Rp2500/20p) in time for a quick dinner and drinks with Charlie and Astrid on Jln. Jabsan. Tomorrow I move on.

## Monday 21 May 2001

### [Bogor](#)

After getting various chores in the am, left for Bogor onboard a local, ekonomi train – quite a colourful experience! I attracted a fair few stares – was the only *buleh* on board – from a rich assortment of passengers and vendors selling anything you can imagine.

But at Rp1,500 – about 10p – it was a bargain way to travel and see some real Indonesian culture at the same time.

Bogor is a bustling and, thank heaven, much cooler town whose main attraction – [Botanical Gardens](#) established by [Stamford Raffles](#) – I'll tackle in the morning.

I'm staying in a very nice place – my own shower! And a proper towel! – that has a verandah overlooking the river just outside my £2.50 room. And this is expensive for Indonesia!

In the evening I ventured into town and the extraordinary bustle of the streets – aglow with the light from many green minibuses and the candles illuminating the street vendors, who seem to be nocturnal creatures. There's a real buzz about the place at night.

## Tuesday 22 May 2001

Aah, the sublime joys of Indonesian bus travel! To get here, I have spent most of the day in an assortment of ramshackle bone-rattling excuses for road-going vehicles, squeezed in much in the same way as clothes fit in my backpack.

It's quite a remarkable skill that the Indonesian driven possesses to strike terror into the soul of *bulehs*. Thus it follow that it's also quite a skill to remain unruffled, as all the other passengers did despite the frequent forays into the lane of oncoming traffic.

Must be genetic; I'm learning the hard way!

Anyhow, it's all been a bit of a disaster, since the hotel my guidebook suggested has more than doubled its prices, and the local establishments appear to have followed suit. Thus, I am currently inhabiting a room that is rented out on a 4-hourly basis – a giant shag-pad with a vast bed and strategically located mirrors to boot.

All of which, I suppose, could be construed as good value at \$6, but it's a little above my budget. (In fact, I half expect my Rp60,000 to include a bedfellow for the night too.) Never mind.

I had a great morning (yes, I've rediscovered the hours between 8 and 11am!) wandering around Bogor's botanical gardens and breakfasting in the Café Botanicus, which has a wonderful view over the lawns that were once grounds of the truly majestic [istana](#).

It wasn't difficult to imagine why Soekarno, Indonesia's first president, so enjoyed coming here – the garden parties must have been superb!

**Wednesday 23 May 2001**

[Bandung](#)

It's ironic that it cost me Rp5,000 to travel for four hours on three different buses from Serkabumi to Bandung today, and that it cost 3x that (after bargaining) to get 5km across town to the hotel! Strange country.

The guesthouse I'm staying in is fantastic – a neat travellers' place, with very friendly hosts, who all play the standard guitar repertoire (“More than words”, “Layla”, etc) into the early hours.

As is so often the case, I got roped into a night of drinking with the other guys her, and we ended up drinking some foul rice wine (arak) at 2am.

Spent the afternoon in town – it's a big place (2 million population) and so I was able to get hold of a cappuccino...what a relief!

I also managed to get involved on a volcano-climbing tour tomorrow – my resolve to stick (rather ambitiously) to a Rp50,000/day budget is definitely on the wane...

### Thursday 24 May 2001

It's so easy to forget how pleasurable some of the simplest things are – today, I had great fun just being in a car with the music blaring and the windows rolled down.

And that wasn't even part of the "tour", which I had to haul myself out of bed at 7.30 (in considerable pain having only got to bed at 2 after too much arak/rice wine) for.

First stop was a village up in the hills where the 'highlight' was an ancient (8<sup>th</sup> century) Hindu temple, but for me it was much more interesting just to see the village at work – the rice paddies and fruit stalls and horse-drawn carts, fondly known as "Ben Hurs".

I think the presence of 3 *bulehs* (2 German girls) was something of a tourist attraction in itself, and we were asked to pose for a photo with a huge gaggle of curious Indonesians – it felt like being the guests of honour in a wedding photo!

The next stop was a silk factory, which was less disturbing than I'd imagined – the workers all seemed to be happy, in uncramped surroundings, and we were told the wage they earned was enough to keep their families from poverty.

I tried my hand at weaving, without much success – the pros do it at almost inhuman speed.

From there, it was off to the real highlight of the trip – [Gunung Papandayan](#). It was quite a titanic effort even to get there – up a long, steep, winding and exceptionally pot-holed track. And then a half-hour walk (past, oddly, an on-location film crew complete with faux log cabin set and countless artistes milling about) to the crater, which was incredible.

An angry collection of steaming yellow fissures that expelled a foul concoction of sulphur and heat. It was all quite other-worldly – like a lunar landscape rather than Planet Earth.

We spent a good hour peering into craters and examining extraordinary mineral deposits and rock formations before heading down to the hot stream that meandered and pooled its way down the mountainside.

A fascinating milky turquoise colour, we were assured it was safe (even beneficial to the skin!) to bathe, so I had the odd sensation of being in water that was far hotter than the open air around it. Odd, but very relaxing, although we all poned a bit after we got out.

### **Friday 25 May 2001**

Well, it's been one of those days. I got up quite early for a change and it was a glorious sunny day- this bodes well for my planned day of seeing the city's sights, I thought.

First task was my laundry, which absolutely reeks of sulphur courtesy of my having put my doofahs in with all my other dirty laundry. 2 hours later and several hand washes later and it still smelt like a bag of yesterday's scrambled eggs.

And then just as I was hanging it all out it started to absolutely pour with rain – and didn't stop for the whole day. And this was serious torrential rain –which scuppered my plans. Instead of the sights, then, I read, and listened to music all day.

But the real disaster came in the evening, when I went out for a coffee with the German girls (who are a great laugh!)...

I spotted a piano so rushed over and started playing but forgot my bag. So 10 minutes later, I suddenly remembered but it had gone. Horror. Passport, money, tickets – everything. So I had to dash back to the hostel – 20 minutes of panic and wondering what to do next.

Of course, then I discovered that I hadn't taken the bloody thing in the first place.

But I've had my fill of the ultimate fear of travelling, so it ain't gonna happen again...

### **Saturday 26 May 2001**

#### **Jogjakarta**

A terrible night's sleep after the bag fracas and also due to paper-thin walls that let in to my room the strains of a pained conversation from somewhere below. (It turns out the German girls had had a tiff; it was all stormy weather over the omelettes this morning.)

But boarded my train OK and was soon speeding through dramatic Javanese countryside, bound for Jogja.

The surprisingly efficient 7.30am service pulled into Jogja over an hour early, and I was met by a tout who, after a short grilling, I gave in to, and was swept to the [Metro Hotel](#) – which turns out to be a great choice.

For my Rp20,000, I get my own room in a very nice courtyard, and the place even has a swimming pool.

I was collared outside the shower by one of the staff who persuaded me to sign up for a couple of tours – since they save me a lot of hassle around Java's most famous sights, it wasn't a difficult sale; on Monday, I go to [Borobodur](#) and [Prambanan](#), on Tuesday, [Mt. Bromo](#) and then [Surabaya](#).

So I don't feel too duped.

I then took up the offer of a free moped ride into town, via the Batik Art School. This was a new experience in more ways than one, for since it's an everyday occurrence to take your own life into your own hands (merely by crossing an Indonesian road), it's quite another to entrust it to a moped-bound Asian.

But he was relatively gentle with me, and I arrived intact at the art school, where I received a fascinating explanation of the [batik](#) procedure and a look at the students' work. I hadn't realized what an enormous variety of batik art there is – it ranges from the traditional to the Lichtenstein-inspired modern, to the styles of the French Impressionists.

And the artistry is exquisite – so much so that I bought a 4-foot long piece, probably at hugely inflated cost, but with the promise that the money would go back into the college facilities.

It seemed genuine, at least, and it's a beautiful piece of art.

I wandered back through town to the hotel, picking up some fantastic snacks en route – it's certainly the most touristed spot on Java, and the [becak](#) offers come in thick and fast.

Back to the hotel for a quiet evening, I think.

### **Sunday 27 May 2001**

Funny day. Woke up late and went for a mid-morning swim and sun-worship by the fantastic pool here. But by lunch time, I was feeling pretty dazed and ropery – maybe something I ate yesterday.

Wandered into town on foot not feeling like myself at all and dived into a/c as soon as I could find it. This turned out to be a shopping mall with a food court at the top, so I settled in for an afternoon of fresh fruit juices and an attempt to recover my equilibrium, which by this point seemed to have evaporated.

So in this rather confused state, I neglected to register that I was in the company almost exclusively of Indonesian gentlemen. I also failed to register anything when two exceptionally polite young men engaged me in friendly banter.

It was only one-and-a-half hours later as I was leaving that my kindly hosts informed me I had spent the afternoon in Jogja's gay cruising area!

That was a part of the country I hadn't intended on seeing!

Anyway, I left for the long walk home and shortly noticed that I was being pursued by some strangely sinister Indonesian male.

Thinking I was paranoid, I crossed the road and ducked and dived into various shops, but he still followed.

So I had to make a covert getaway on a speeding kecak (something of an exaggeration: becaks are pedal-powered and manned by sinewy, elderly Indonesian men).

But it all had an air of excitement, anyway.

Not my planned day of Javanese cultural pursuits, but I suppose culturally enlightening in its own way!

**Monday 28 May 2001**

Well my malady turned into a full-blown episode of gastrointestinal grievances last night, resulting in my sleeping not a wink and having the most disturbing hallucinogenic dreams that involved each limb of my body being an individual personality. Very strange.

However, I still had to get up at 4.15am to tell the staff I wouldn't be going on the sunrise tour to Borobodur and later Prambanan.

When I finally did get up, I was feeling much more human again and decided to go it alone to B'bodur.

One-and-a-half hours later by public bus, I arrived in the village and was of course bombarded with offers of “becak” and “souvenir”. This was a mere foreshadow of what was to come, as the main site is swarming with aggressive hawkers.

Something of a shame, since the constant cry of “hello mister” somewhat detracts from the sense of awe that the temple itself inspires.

It’s a fantastic structure – vast in bulk yet intricately detailed in its construction, with elaborately carved panels of stone running the length and breadth of the walls.

I spent an hour walking round the terraces, but fending off a) custom and b) photographs eventually got the better of me, and I returned to the sanctuary of the bus back to Yogja.

Discovered back at the hotel that one of the people I met at Bandung had turned up – I’m not exactly travelling off the beaten track at the moment! – so we had a night-cap before I clambered back into a very welcoming bed.

**Tuesday 29 May 2001**

**Cemoro Lawang**

A 13-hour day of travel – not much to write about, except for the maniacal driving technique, which is rather old hat these days.

With us were two Parisians and as I turned to one in an attempt to soften the atmosphere of absolutely mortal fear created by Western concern for safety meeting Eastern total disregard for same, I said “On conduit comme ça à Paris, non?”

Instead of the jovial reply I was expecting, he turned his sheet-white face and through clenched teeth muttered “Non. Ce n’est pas comme ça...”

It was quite a journey – from a Parisian, that’s quite a statement of fear!

Nonetheless, we arrived intact at the fantastic **Café Lava** hostel near Mt. Bromo – it was a great relief to don a jumper and jeans (of course the locals, unaccustomed to such weather conditions, were toggled up in full parka and woolie hat garb.)

We all knocked off to bed relatively early – a shame to leave the ski-lodge atmosphere of the café, but needed sleep for the early morning tomorrow.

**Wednesday 30 May 2001**

**Kuta (Bali)**

Up at sparrow's fart (3.30am) for the sunrise viewing over Mt. Bromo. Well worth the effort (and yesterday's epic journey) for jaw-dropping views as the darkness retreated and daylight seeped into the sky.

A parade of reds, yellows and blues provided a backdrop to the awesome landscape which gradually loomed into view. From our vantage point, we could see mountains and volcanoes, thick forest and small village settlements, all shrouded in a pall of cloud that dribbled over the undulation of the land. Extraordinary.

A bumpy jeep ride and steep climb later, we were peering into the enormous crater of [Gunung Bromo](#) itself, which steams constantly but with much less ferocity than [Papandayan](#) – languid, almost.

Bromo itself is flanked by G. Senaru, which provides a much more dramatic spectacle – a picture-perfect eruption of ash every 20 minutes. I wouldn't want to be around to see ash replaced by lava.

Anyhow, it was all quite an exhibition of nature – and all before 7am!

Back to a good breakfast and much-needed coffee before once again climbing into a dreaded bemo for the journey east through Java and to Bali.

I met some French guys, so it was nice to parler Français for a while and we discussed the upcoming political traumas in Indonesia.

It seems we had chosen the right time to leave Java – as we drove toward the ferry port, we came across various lorry loads of angry-looking Indonesians brandishing large knives and jeering at all who passed – en route to [Surabaya](#), we were told, to show their support for the embattled president.

Since violence seems to be the harbinger of political movement here, it was all a little ominous, and we were more than happy to move on to the less politically volatile Bali.

More than happy, that is, until we got there (after another interminable bus journey to the south of the island).

It's official: I loathe Kuta, the tourist trap – and, in my opinion, puckered up arsehole – of Bali.

Chief among my gripes with the place is the crime problem, which immediately made itself known – as I was getting off the bus and collecting my backpack,

someone whipped open my double-sealed day bag and nabbed my beloved Walkman. £200 worth of stuff gone in an instant.

I chased down the bus, thinking it might still be in there, but no luck. Argh. The only minute I'm not guarding my bag like a hawk, and the worst happens. Oh well, at least they didn't get my passport.

Downheartened, checked into a hostel and went for a beer at the famous [Tube Bar](#), but it was full of bronzed and beautiful people so I felt a bit like a pale blimp.

I can't wait to leave here...

**Thursday 31 May 2001**

[Senggigi \(Lombok\)](#)

Woke up at 7am and decided to take advantage and leave ASAP. Of course I had to get a police report for yesterday first, so I spent an hour in the police station watching various officers type out my details at snail's pace first on an old typewriter and then on a computer.

For the privilege I was charged an 'administrative fee' of Rp30,000. I should have refused to pay, but didn't have the stamina – the money went indiscreetly into my conscientious officer's pocket, of course.

Anyway, what started out as a frustrating day eventually came good as I embarked on yet another epic day of travel on my quest to reach the [Gili Islands](#) – “where heaven meets earth” according to many.

On the ferry journey from Bali to Lombok I got chatting to a couple of friendly Canadians (who were DEFINITELY not Americans, they were keen to stress, and whose experiences had been either “awesome” or “brutal”) and we continued on together towards Senggigi, the drop-off point for the Gilis.

We found an absolutely divine place to stay – beautiful clean bungalows ranged around a lush tropical garden. Even the bathrooms are an extension of the greenery, with palms and ferns forming a natural wall on one side. A real tropical hideaway.

We went for a great meal in a beautiful outdoor restaurant and generally felt very smug that we were no longer in Kuta.