

Nusa Penida

(<http://www.nusapenida.nl>).

-- Black Magic Island? (NG 2012) ▼

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There exists a solemn rite that every Balinese Hindu is expected to complete at least once during this lifetime. They must make a special pilgrimage to "Nusa Penida", the black magic island, to visit a particular temple whose energy provides negative balance to the positive side of divinity. At one time Nusa Penida was inhabited by ghouls, demons, and dark spirits, including one of the most feared evil spirits in the local mythology: I Macaling, the spreader of sickness and disease.

Penida (or priests) of the neighboring Gelgel kingdom and the island of Bali were sent to cleanse the island and banish I Macaling. It was this metaphysical battle of light and dark that gave the island its name.



I Macaling was not completely subdued; his influence is formidable when he is angered. Those on the mainland blame the small landmass, just an hour's boat ride from the cosmopolitan bustle of Bali, for disasters like floods and the proliferation of disease. Negative associations don't stop at black magic: the island was also the penal colony for criminal outcasts in the 18th century, and is generally thought to be dry and inhospitable. Why would it be so crucial to visit such a tainted place? The Balinese spiritual belief system, a unique hybrid of Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism, conceptualizes the universe in terms of balance, and respects both good and evil as equally necessary and mutually present. It remains then that the island is an important spiritual destination – but only when religious holidays dictate attendance.

I arrived on the shores of Nusa Penida this past summer, and when I hopped out of the boat, my feet were enveloped by warm, crystal clear waters, lapping softly onto ivory sand, speckled with pearlescent and crimson seashells. Bunches of unusual tropical fruits sat cool and inviting in the shade of the numerous warungs, or food stalls, along the beach. The wooden structures themselves were equally as snug and colorful in their seemingly endless arrangement, tapering off beneath the shadows of verdant cliffs. Mt. Agung, the tallest peak on Bali, filled the sky with quiet authority to the North, across a sea whose placid surface would occasionally scintillate with a rush of flying fish and betray the existence of kaleidoscopic reefs below. Exploring inland, I was greeted with more invigorating views, more revitalizing beaches, and a wealth of engaging, curious people. It would seem that the "curse" of Nusa Penida had actually become a blessing, and that this was one place on earth that, as the program manager of the conservation efforts on the island would put it, still had hope.

This profound optimism, shared by locals and ex-pat conservation volunteers alike, is the result of a unique blend of remarkable characteristics that are rarely encountered in synchrony elsewhere.

First of all, the island is a biological treasure-trove. The landmass is well known as an unofficial endangered bird sanctuary, and its surrounding waters have a stellar reputation among divers who can spend hours



absorbed in the commotion of healthy and flourishing coral reefs. Scuba divers commonly encounter large marine species such as giant mantas, the Mola-Mola fish, and whale sharks. Recently, the area has garnered the attention of scientists eager to follow up on claims that previously un-catalogued species, like legless lizards and colorful species of crab, scuttle about undisturbed and "undiscovered".

Secondly, the island's relative isolation, the importance of traditional spirituality, and its lack of energy-intensive infrastructure foster a relatively tranquil atmosphere almost completely devoid of Western development. Hope exists in the kind-natured mentality of the local people, the area's visible disconnect from many of the larger spoils of Westernization, and the almost complete lack of tourist infrastructure. I would even go so far as to say that this rare combination of immense natural beauty, inadvertent isolation, and cultural integrity have the ability to inspire people to believe there are places where capitalism can occupy a drowsy backdrop to more substantial principles of subsistence-living, environmental protection, and community.

The organization on the island most inspired by its potential is small but hardy, much like the birds they rehabilitate. The Friends of the National Park Foundation (FNPF), is a non-profit organization founded by veterinarian and Bali native Bayu Wirayuda. Operating within the philosophy of community-based conservation, FNPF's mission calls for the protection of local wildlife while simultaneously nurturing the

people that respect conservation practices. The idea is to create relationships that by virtue of the welfare of individual life forms improve the wellbeing of the collective. Such a partnership has flourished in favor of one of Bali's most charming birds - and its national emblem - the Bali Starling.



In his 2012 TED Talk Dr. Bayu related his personal relationship with the Starling. His father, who had been a police officer, once confiscated several of the milky, plump birds, and Bayu, who admittedly spent an unusual

amount of time around pet birds as a child, boldly asked if he could keep one himself. The answer was no, and his father explained, "These birds are illegal to own." One Bali Starling can fetch up to \$3,000 on the black market, a sum that can replace months of labor, and a figure poachers readily brave imprisonment for. Due to the insatiable demand for this bird's capture, only ten Bali Starlings existed in the wild in 2005. Now, just seven years later, 200 Starlings fly freely on the island, and census reports from 16 separate locations continue to be positive. Nusa Penida is also a haven for Java Sparrows, Sulphur Crested Cockatoos, and Mitchell's Lorakeets.

Ensuring island-wide participation in the sanctuary program was not a simple task. All forty-three villages were required to agree to an "awig-awig", or a regulation that would be adhered to by virtue of local customary law. And, in true island fashion, it was a process drawn out by lengthy visits and return-visits to each village – which were often interrupted by practicalities such as ceremonies and deteriorating roads - which spanned a length of two years before consensus was reached. In return for the communities' official and pain-stakingly organized vow to protect the birds, FPNP provides islanders with a library, school supplies for disadvantaged students, traditional Balinese dance classes, English classes, weekly clean-up days, free saplings of various tree species such as coffee and teak, and most recently, an array of organic community gardens, which I will address later.

Eco-tourism has also been suggested as a sustainable livelihood venture for local residents, but hasn't yet "grown wings". Given eco-tourism's track record for inviting more garbage than good to previously undisturbed areas, the lack of widespread tourist infrastructure could be of more value to the island and provide space for an array of alternate livelihoods to be developed. (In the meantime however, foreign investors are already prospecting for plots of land that are suitable for modern resorts and spas, a process which has instilled a sense of anxiety in residents who don't want their land to become another "Kuta", an increasingly commercialized and touristy hot-spot on Bali, where the 2002 bombings took place.)

The almost utopian qualities of this island are not unmarked by burdens, however. The local economy is almost completely reliant on seaweed harvests, where financial benefits are accumulated much farther down the production line, leaving people impoverished and dependent on a fluctuating market. Conversely, subsistence crops are noticeably absent, and Nusa Penida is forced to import almost all of its food supply from Bali. In a world where self-sufficiency is becoming increasingly necessary due to changing, unpredictable

climates and the rising cost of fuel, the hope and optimism that Nusa Penida portrays in terms of environmental and cultural preservation will be tested by its very foundation: the sandy, limestone-based soil that narrowly blankets the land. Introducing organic crops, which are risky ventures in and of themselves, in an environment that does not easily lend itself to agriculture, asks a lot of families already living hand-to-mouth. FNPF is convinced however that the programs have potential, and has launched ten pilot projects across the island - a topic that will be explored more in depth in the next entry.

Earlier this year, in January, Nusa Penida experienced unprecedented poor weather that consisted of thunderstorms, floods, tornados, and seas so tempestuous that food shipments were delayed. Dire circumstances such as these could increase in frequency as global warming progresses, transforming the people of Nusa Penida from rural villagers into "climate refugees" a categorization that, according to the Association of the Advancement of Science, is predicted to claim 50 million people by 2020.

According to Balinese-Hindu spiritual teachings, any energy with the potential for destruction has an equal and opposite potential for creation - a capacity that even a force as formidable as I Macaling inevitably possesses. This island currently occupies a gray space, as all communities do, lingering on the threshold of poverty, impending development in whatever form it will take, and quite possibly the elusive symbiotic, natural existence with the environment that so many imagine and search for. Here will play the eternal struggle between creation and destruction that mirrors the condition of life from the dawn of time. Personally, I am one of those who hope the people of Nusa Penida and their land weather storms, both literal and figurative, with the resourcefulness for which the Balinese are so famous, and with the blessings of the gods.



Source

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