

19/2/06

7 days

The trickiest part of our trip was the airport. Too many foreigners in one place. Such a contrast to where we'd just been. I'd felt just as nervous on arrival a week ago. The Balinese Customs Officer that processed me on the way in was pretty much like every official in South East Asia - resplendent in skin-tight uniform. But this guy had a peculiarly thin moustache and clipped eyebrows. He was almost feminine.

"How long you stay in Bali?" he said opening my passport. Like most other passengers, I'd already loaded it up with US\$ for the visa payment.

"Seven days" I said.

"Seppen day visa – 15 dollar US."

Beauty. Just saved myself ten bucks US. I was sure it was \$25 for the visa.

Just as well I'd got two tens and a five. He extracted the new US notes carefully it and looked at me with a faint smile.

'For me?' he said, holding up a ten.

'No, No ...' I said with a smile, ' I very poor!'

He put the note back in the passport, stamped one of its pages aggressively and handed it across the counter.

Truth is, I was travelling poor. I'd brought just enough for seven days. In fact, I wanted to do the whole week for under a hundred bucks. And I did - with twenty Australian and that US tenner left over.

So here we are, seven days later, a bucket load of waves under our belt, in line at Customs. Neal's ahead of me and goes through, no worries. I'm next. I hand my passport over and try to spot Neal in the distance. He's heading for the duty free. I look down at the Customs Officer. It's him. The same guy. Moustache Man. He's studying my passport too hard. He picks up the phone and says a few words in Indonesian. He puts the phone down, looks up at me.

'Problem. You stay too long for Visa.'

'Today is 15th. Arrive Bali 8th' I say with a trace of attitude, '7 days'.

He turns around and points at the clock.

'You're kidding' I say as the penny drops. I've been in Bali precisely 7 days, one hour and twenty two minutes.

Moments later, I'm whisked into a stark office. I turn around and see a couple in another office opposite. There's a Swedish flag on one of the backpacks. She's crying. I catch sight of myself in the reflection of the door as it closes behind a nasty looking official and Moustache Man. I look shabby. Singlet. Boardies. Stubble. Shit, I've even got a little zinc left on my face.

'I'm sorry. My fault. Honest mistake. I will pay fine' I say wondering how much cash Neal has and whether I can get out to him. The nasty looking one pulls out a book and points to a number.

'\$20US?' I say hopefully.

He nods. I can cover it. I pull out the twenty Australian from my wallet and point at the passport.

‘There’s \$10US in there. You can keep it all’. The nasty looking one flicks through the passport. Nothing. The ten US has vanished. I look at Moustache Man and he holds my gaze for a second then looks away. Fucking bastard.

Twenty Australian is short. An insult. The nasty looking one shakes his head, gets up and leaves the room with the money and my passport. I look back at Moustache Man. I open my wallet and show him there’s nothing there. I must look shit scared. He shifts in his chair, looks at me uncomfortably, then gets up and leaves the room.

Next thing I know, I’m out a side door standing in front of a couple trying out a duty free camera.

‘Oi’ says Neal, ‘where you been? Wanna go halves in a bottle Scotch?’