

Indonesia Travel Prize Report, Ellarose Keith

Over the easter vac 2023 I travelled to Indonesia. I moved around every few days for the month I was there, including visiting Bali, various Gili Islands and Lombok. The timing of my trip meant I was able to witness the Hindu festival of Nyepi, also referred to as silence day, as well as many other amazing cultural and religious practices.

Each of these islands has a historic and distinctive culture, which have become inextricably intertwined with the religions of the island. This is something I found particularly striking and was keen to investigate.

In Bali, the main religion is Hinduism, whilst Lombok is majority Muslim. As a result of a rich Indonesian culture, these religions present in an original way, demonstrating aspects of the traditional practice of such religions, alongside the continued cultural features of the islands.

Religion and Ceremony in Bali: Nyepi

Hinduism in Bali is mostly similar to the Hinduism observed in India, however it has been massively influenced by the pre-existing religions and spirituality of Bali, especially animism. In this way, the festival of Nyepi is representational of how Hinduism has been integrated with traditional ancestor worship.

Nyepi fell on the 22nd march and is comprised of a two-day religious observance. The first day is marked by celebration of the ghosts and evil spirits that have historically inhabited the island, and the ogoh ogoh parade. Massive figures (called ogoh ogoh) are built out of bamboo by members of the villages and put on platforms to be paraded down the streets. The day before the celebration we saw all the figures being brought out and placed on the side of the road in preparation– some of them are actually very terrifying, with haunting faces, wild hair and claws. They are meant to represent a mixture of demons and also some figures from Hindu myths – however, I mostly witness the demonic characters and struggled to identify the mythological characters! ... these are a few of the models we saw...



The following day, the silence is observed to encourage the spirits to return to sleep and leave the island at peace. Alongside silence, Balinese Hindus keep all lights switched off, and spend time in meditation and self-reflection. This allows them to strengthen their relationship with God (the Balinese supreme god is Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa). Talking to a local Balinese man, we discussed his thoughts on Silence Day. He stated that the silence, in quietening the spirits, is also a cleanse from evil for the entire island, including the evil brought about through human action.

He also told me about the origins of the festival according to his local tradition – there is very little information available on the origins and so this may be the understanding of a particular area only. He said that observing the festival is a command given to the Balinese people by a holy man (although he couldn't recall the name, and I have been unable to find it!) when people first moved over to the island. This holy man allegedly received a commandment whilst atop a mountain, which he conveyed to the people: if they wished to inhabit the island, they must first celebrate and thank god, and then cleanse the island of negative spirits.

Temples

I visited a number of temples across both Bali and Lombok, which were incredible. Uluwatu temple is one of the biggest temples in Bali and is devoted to Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa. The temple is beautiful and sits on the edge of a cliff over the sea. Monkeys inhabit the temple and terrorise the tourists by stealing their sunglasses! One of the most impressive statues at Uluwatu temple was of Kumbha Karna, a character from a Hindu tale called Ramayana. Another impressive temple was Sengigi Temple, dedicated to Shaivism. Many of the statues here were devoted to Dang Hyang Nirartha, in front of which there were offerings of flowers and banana palms.

Here are some images of temples I visited:



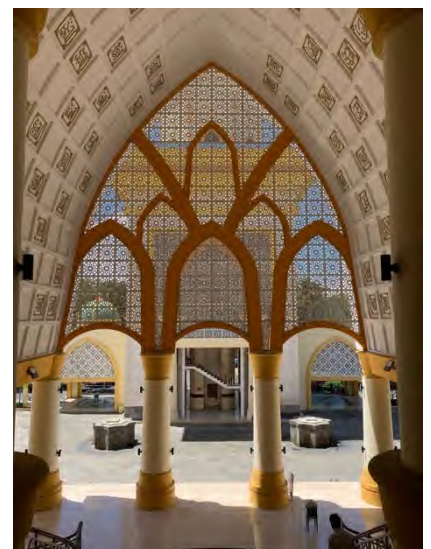


Mosques

Lombok is famous for the number of mosques it houses – it is referred to locally as the ‘island of a thousand mosques’.

The largest mosque on the island is in Mataram, the capital, which took 6 years to complete (from 2010 to 2016) – and then had its minaret damaged in the earthquake in 2018. The mosque is huge, with the capacity for 50,000 people – day to day there are not nearly this many Muslims present, however the Jumma prayers held every Friday see people travel from around the island to congregate here.

Mataram mosque effectively demonstrates the cross-over of culture and religion in Lombok. Whilst maintaining the typical Islamic structure and calligraphy, there is also multiple features that relate to the historical and traditional nature of Lombok. For example, the internal centre of the dome houses calligraphy depicting ‘Allah’, but the blue design surrounding this presents a local Lombok pattern, which has been linked to the original Sasak people of Lombok. Similarly, the outer design of the mosque consists of woodwork lattice in an intricate design, which has been taken from the design of the local sasak people, who were the original inhabitants of the island.



As well as these visits, I saw and did so much more around Indonesia, and feel there is definitely still more to be discovered from such a vibrant and diverse culture. I went to a local cooking class where I learnt to make some traditional Indonesian dishes using local produce, as well as visiting beautiful beaches, waterfalls, rice paddies, and even exploring under the sea with some diving trips. We spent two days climbing to the crater rim of the volcano Mount Rinjani on Lombok which was an incredible hike (quite hard work but worth it for the views).

The way in which religion functions across this part of the world, in conjunction with tradition, culture, and history makes it so unique and such a rich fabric to engage with. On top of this the people are so welcoming, and the food is delicious! I would definitely recommend a trip to this part of the world to everyone !

