A Paradise bombed

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Just after the Bali bombings of October 12, 2002, a colleague asked one of those curly questions academics sometimes get asked in seminars: "Has Bali’s place in the Indonesian imagination now changed; is it like New York in the United States after September 11, when it became part of America’s ‘heartland’?" I thought the better question was about Bali’s place in Australia’s national imagination. Has Bali become more, or less, of an Australian "heartland" in the devastation of Paddy’s Bar and the Sari Club? How do Australians cope with the idea that our island of domesticated exotica has been made unsafe?

Before the bombings, paradise island occupied a special place in our mental map of the Asian region. Bali stood apart from the rest of Indonesia at the idyllic end of a spectrum in the Australian imagination, an extension of Byron and Noosa. The bombings targeted our sense of place, a paradoxical reminder that we are still in Asia, and Indonesia is our nearest Asian neighbour.

At the other end of the spectrum of Australian views about the region is the Asia of danger where Indonesia proper is found - summed up in the cliché of "living dangerously". Somewhere in between came the search for wealth, the Keating promise that Asia was where we would make our millions: "Living Dangerously", "Trading Asia" and "Bali Days". This essay is a eulogy for "Bali" before it was subsumed by the Asia of "Living Dangerously".

The years of writing dangerously

"Living Dangerously" is the most familiar and comforting image we have of our neighbourhood - comforting because it means we can stay at home while the occasional handsome, intrepid adventurer - a journalist out of the Neil Davis mould - can venture there for us. The idea of dangerous Asia made its first appearance in the 1880s and 1890s. The motif appeared in short stories and novels in which Asians invaded Australia. When Asians were not invading us, brave white adventurers went north. Many, like the protagonists of Alexander Montgomery’s Bulletin short stories of the 1890s, came to a bad
end. Some of these adventurers went in search of wealth. They learnt that promises of gold and trade were not worth the cost, particularly when the danger included the treacherous women of native descent who wanted to lure them onto the rocks of degeneracy.

Such tales continued to be produced through the 1920s and 1930s. Not all dealt with danger, but there was a predominance of headhunting Dayak warriors, Bugis pirates and Papuan cannibals on the boundary where Australia met the Netherlands East Indies, Indonesia’s more reliable antecedent.

World War II fulfilled many of these prophecies - Asians swept down from the north. The myth of the Asian hordes had prepared Australians for such an invasion; only America could save us.

War novels continued the story and although, initially, these were sparse, by the 1960s and 1970s they merged into Cold War variations of invading Asia. There was a range, from the relentlessly earnest writings of "those who were there" in Vietnam to Jon Cleary’s more popular and interesting adventures that never took themselves too seriously. They gave the Anzac legend an Asian setting.

"Living Dangerously" culminated in Christopher Koch’s book, which took its title from a Sukarno speech. Koch’s book did not emerge until more than a decade after the catastrophic killings of 1965-66 when between 500,000 and 1 million Indonesians were murdered by their compatriots. Those murders form the epilogue, rather than the substance, of Koch’s book, as if no Australian imaginative writing could take on the scale and the horror of the killings. The journalist-hero can wander on the fringes but cannot describe the horror. Despite a handful of imaginative works that dealt with Indonesian politics and the invasion of East Timor, the stories that reached the widest Australian audiences remained tales of invasion - John Marsden’s Tomorrow series - although Indonesia is not named.

"Living Dangerously" became hyper-real for Australians through the media’s coverage of the 1999 vote for independence in East Timor and its aftermath. The appalling destruction of Dili, an event into which first Australian journalists and then Australian troops inserted themselves, fulfilled all the prophecies in the exotic literature of blood-thirsty Indonesians. Against the perfidious and murderous hordes portrayed in stories about Indonesians attacking diggers, the heroic Anzac came to the rescue. In many reports the diggers were presented as a sporting team with guns, with troops who described themselves as being there to "kick Militia arse". The Anzac element was made overt in the re-enactment of the Gallipoli landing on Dili Beach, April 25, 2000. As if to mock Australia’s idée fixe of Asia, technically the relief of Dili was an Australian-led invasion of Indonesian territory. For all our fears of them invading us, in the end it was
the other way around.

**Trading places (briefly)**

After 1999, Left and Right were joined in the view that "Living Dangerously" was the correct, if not the only, way to view Asia, particularly Indonesia. This was the death knell to what had been largely a top-down attempt to create a new view of Asia during the Keating years. A brief new promise that an expanding middle class in Asia, especially Indonesia, would provide a market to replace Australia’s dependence on Europe and the United States was dislodged. This had been a major reversal. The teeming millions who, in Gough Whitlam’s parody, would descend on Australia through gravity, now became our friendly buyers. The only problem with this view was the cost: "engagement", which was incompatible with concerns about human-rights abuses, the suppression of democracy and the fate of the East Timorese people.

"Trading Asia" and the new focus on Indonesia had been a Canberra-Jakarta affair, full of celebratory images and champagne over the Timor Gap. It was a creation of government advisers, the only people convinced by it. When the Asian Crash came and the rupiah plummeted, only the rump of the "Indonesia lobby", a few Australian National University economists, seemed surprised. Few now disagree that the "engagement" needed for "Trading Asia" led us down a wrong path.11

**Down on Bali bays**

Still, despite constant reminders of Indonesia’s danger, Australians like me kept going to its premier tourist island. The bombing victims included people who also tried to get back every year. The ease with which we looked past Bali’s connection to Indonesia testified to the strength of Bali-as-paradise, born of long historical experience.

Bali began life as a tourist destination for Australians as part of a cruise-ship itinerary for the wealthy. Occasional travel notices of journeys, such as Margaret Preston’s 1924 trip, helped to spread a benevolent view of the island. At the beginning of World War II, one of Australia’s most popular writers, Frank Clune (with his fascist ghost writer "Inky" Stephenson), presented Bali as a charming island of brown men and topless women, a mixture of Hindu culture and South Seas relaxation.12 This description, combined with the growing international accumulation of books and films about the island, fed into erotic tales of temple bells and dancers.13

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the artistic reputation of the island attracted Donald Friend. He was following in the footsteps of his fellow artist Ian Fairweather, but it was Friend, through his long residence, reported in everything from the Australian Women’s Weekly to his own books and film, who helped Australians feel at home in Bali.14 This
was supported by a wave of Australian travel books.\textsuperscript{15}

At this time there was a boom in the study of the Indonesian language in schools, and some of the first school groups visited, like the one I was on as a country kid dazzled by a green world of rituals and art. The group I was with did not stay at Kuta but in Denpasar, for $1 a night. Our losmen provided the basic requirements of a bed, a mandi, where you stood in the bathroom and ladled cold water over yourself, and a friendly Balinese family atmosphere.

My first "hit" of Balinese culture came in the same way that it surprises and delights most tourists. On the way from the Ngurah Rai Airport we stopped for a ceremonial procession, all chattering gongs and bright colours, and were invited to witness the coming cremation for which the procession was an overture. A few days later we were duly caught up in the throng at the graveyard of Pamecutan, in the western part of the city. Amidst the children selling flavoured ices and other refreshments, we crowded with morbid fascination to see the corpse being put into its bull-shaped sarcophagus before it and the beautiful accompanying tower were consumed by flames.

Bali leaves such strong impressions and vivid memories on most tourists, because this cultural extravaganza is so easily found. Even if we do not understand it, it is so impressive that it lingers in the mind, a unique experience that merges with balmy tropical evenings in small restaurants and dramatic sunsets.

A part of Bali famous for its sunsets, Kuta Beach became especially Australian. Its location on the hippie trail meant that many Australian travellers did not get beyond the magic mushrooms served in cheap cafes or warung near the beach. For them, Bali represented a special freedom and the image was reinforced by "alternative" magazines such as Oz. The hippie pilgrims were joined by surfies ready to take the cosmic trip.

By the 1980s, Kuta was domesticated. The magic mushrooms and cheap ganja were less obvious, replaced by middle-range hotels catering for middle Australia on a budget, but seeking more style than the cold water losmen that suited hippies and surfies. During the 1980s the tourists moved away from Denpasar to their new segregated areas in Nusa Dua and Sanur. This was the beginning of mass tourism and Australians made up the masses.

A sign of the change in Kuta was the opening of Ocker bars, like the Waltzing Matilda, complete with wet T-shirt competitions and drunken brawls. Qantas tourist brochures promised singles meetings, roast pig on a spit and plenty of beer, in hotels run "for Australians, by Australians". This prompted journalistic soul-searching about the threat to Balinese culture by "ugly Aussies" who "might as well be in their local at Parramatta or some Kings Cross strip joint".\textsuperscript{16} I can understand the cringe, having sat in the departure
lounge of the old airport surrounded by sunburnt, drunk and heavily stoned Aussies bragging about the waves and their encounters with "the Balos". The Sari Club was that kind of bar; "Indonesians not allowed", as the sign said at the door.

By the late 1980s the hippies, grown older, were taking their children, as so well depicted in Karen and Nigel Krauth’s teen novel Sin Can Can. The young protagonist, Ashlie, described her "yobbo" compatriots behaving badly. "Dad", an "ageing hippie", was always worried about "getting ripped off". The book repeated the endless litany of the beach sellers: "You like cool drink?" "Massage?" "T-shirt?" "Postcard?" "Wood carving?" "Jewellery?" "Chess set?" "Bamboo xylophone?" "Monkey mask?" "Antique ashtray?" "Very cheap price." Enterprising Balinese with a sense of humour had anticipated such expressions of tourist frustration by producing a T-shirt proclaiming:

No
I Don't want
A fucking
Bemo
Massage
Postcard
Jiggy Jig

By the late 1980s, Bali was properly domesticated. Australians formed partnerships with locals in a thriving garment industry. Expatriates, such as landscape architect Made Wijaya, helped to popularise the Bali style and by the mid-1990s shops full of Balinese bric-a-brac could be found in most Australian shopping centres. This growing familiarity was accompanied by attempts to get under the skin of Balinese culture in film and academic study.

Sin Can Can’s family opted out of the crassness of Kuta for the cultural experience of Ubud, the setting also for a later novel by Gerard Lee called Troppo Man. Being a teenage novel, Ashlie’s experiences were chaste, but in her friendship with the character Rai and her general appreciation of the island’s "spunks", the island’s reputation as a source of attractive Balinese men for Australian women was clear.

This has fascinated the Australian media. Janet Hawley’s article "Don’t Cry for Bali" was the first article on the subject. She described young Australian girls, "usually on their first holiday abroad", who "fall madly in love with [these] undeclared gigolos", the "Kuta Cowboys".

The association of Bali with female sexuality made it liberating for Australian society, contrary to the chauvinistic current of "Living Dangerously." In novels of the "Living Dangerously" type, miscegenation usually led to death. In Bali it led to new types of
Australians, quite literally, as the many relationships created marriages and Balinese-Australian children.

Media reports of Balinese as happy, smiling, cultured people threatened by the effects of tourism, reassured Australians that we were inhabitants of the First World. In these reflections on Bali in the media and the arts, we emerged as crass "Bazzas in Bali", women seeking sexual emancipation or more thoughtful seekers of cultural difference. Bali, in other words, provided a way to think about being Australian.

**Danger in paradise**

The bombings in Kuta were not the first sign that Bali was not so far from danger. Throughout the 1980s there were reports of Australians jailed on drug offences, drownings in the dangerous rips off Kuta, a death from cholera and the breaking of a bungy-jumping machine leading to an Australian's death.\(^2\)

Despite attempts since the Dili massacre of 1991 to organise "Boycott Bali" campaigns, Bali remained separate to Australian thinking about Indonesia until the full horror of the 1999 East Timor events sank in. Then, briefly, boycotts against all things Indonesian, including trips to Bali, were successful and news reports reminded Australians that East Timorese militia members and leaders were regular visitors to Bali.\(^24\) Australians were lured back to Bali by cheap holidays and, until the October bombings, the experiences of 1999 were quickly put away like a military uniform at the back of our imaginative wardrobe. Travel reports of Bali's attractions remained constant. The most poignant appeared in the travel section of The Sydney Morning Herald's weekend edition of October 12, 2002, "Rich Pickings. You no longer need to be a film or pop star to get a taste of colonial opulence in a Balinese villa".

It took a while for the news of the bombings to reach me and the retrospective incongruity of that story on the same weekend was a small part of the shock. Even as a well-seasoned traveller familiar with small bombings and acts of violence in Jakarta, Makasar and the many "hot spots" of communal conflict, I was unable to comprehend what was going on. I rang Balinese friends immediately. They were all all right. Being middle-class and middle-aged they were not at the Sari Club but were equally confused. It took days before a clear picture filtered through. I little expected the impact that would ripple through Australia as the list of the dead and injured grew. One of my students had often spoken of her big brother who lived in South-East Asia. He was one of a group of expatriates in Bali for a football tournament and his was the last Australian body brought home.

The media coverage of the Bali bombings brought out all the contradictions of Australian views of the island, of Asia in general, and of us. While the occasional headline
spoke of "Paradise Lost", sub-editors reached for "Days of Living Dangerously" to sum up the shock and horror of the events. Journalists remembered that Bali was in Indonesia in reports with titles such as "50km from Bali, you are now entering Osama Country".

The extensive and very painful coverage of the details of the lives of all those who died included many references to those of them who went to Bali year after year; who, like the father in the Krauths’s novel, loved the place so much they took their children back there. This was a time for pondering what it meant to be Australian. Coverage of the Prime Minister’s empathy for the families of the victims brought this out. Paul Kelly wrote of the Prime Minister that "the Bali tragedy has unbuttoned, briefly, his emotional straitjacket. For Howard, it has opened a journey of self-discovery". Comparisons were made to the Anzacs; there were many tales of deeply heroic acts described in terms of "mateship". The fact that many of those who died were football players underlined their Australianness. Sport was a key part of many of the victims’ life stories.

Many reports reminded us that Balinese, too, were suffering. While it was natural to focus on other Australians, the strength of the accounts of the lives and circumstances of Balinese victims, including those who lost their livelihoods as a result, was testimony to attempts to empathise beyond our borders.

The idea of "Bali" battles "Living Dangerously". "Bali" is an image that captures the experiences of millions of Australians. The resurgence of "Living Dangerously" in the zone of savages, terrorists and SARS, reminds us that Asia is not home.

Yet those of us who have "left our hearts … down on Bali bays" feel differently. Those who have surfed, traded and married - and even those who have fought - in the region continue to be drawn back, or more properly, to pull Australia northward.

Footnotes
1 Alison Broinowski’s The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992, is an attempt to convince readers that Asia is important to Australia.
2 See David Walker, Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999, esp. chapter 8. My thanks to David and my other former UNSW colleague, John Ingelson, for support for my earlier research on Australia’s perceptions of Asia.
5 My gratitude goes to the anonymous writers of the catalogue cards at the Mitchell Library for helping to identify these writers.
8 Richard Tanter, “Witness Denied”, Inside Indonesia 71 (July-September 2001). www.insideindonesia.org/edit71 has documented the suppression of reports of the killings in Australian
newspapers of the time, despite the presence of journalists such as Frank Palmos in the country.


10 A sample of newspaper and television coverage from late September until early October is full of images of our troops as heroic “freedom fighters” saving the East Timorese.


12 Frank Clune, To the Isles of Spice, Angus and Robertson: Sydney, 1940.

13 Margo Courtney, Flight into Paradise, Surrey: Melbourne, 1953, a tale of lust and intrigue about a beachcomber and a dancer.


16 From a series of articles about “Bali’s Ugly Aussies” by Mike Safe, The Daily Telegraph, October 14, 1986.

17 Puffin Plus/Penguin: Ringwood, 1987. The title is a kind of pidgin Balinese, from the term “sing ken-ken,” “it’s nothing”.

18 ibid, p. 52.

19 John Darling’s first film, Lempad of Bali, was made with Lorne Blair in 1980. He went on to make other films throughout the 1980s, including Bali Hash with John Moyle. My own involvement in films includes my work on Kerry Negara’s Done Bali.


23 eg, 7.30 Report, ABC television, July 14-15, 1988. See also Peter Hasting’s report, “Bali can be a Dangerous Paradise”, The Sydney Morning Herald, March 12, 1981, an article that was part of the (successful) campaign for Australia to open a consulate in Bali, and The Daily Telegraph’s reports on “Paradise’ that can become hell”, October 12, 1985.

24 A report on ABC Radio’s PM program of October 4, 1999, claimed that a militia member had threatened a tourist with a gun in Ubud.


26 The Daily Telegraph, October 26, 2002. The same issue included extensive coverage of those who died or were injured and a small piece on Balinese reactions to death.


28 The moving account on 60 Minutes (Channel 9, April 6, 2003) of a return to Bali of Australian victims of the bombing was typical in its inclusion of Balinese in the coverage.

29 Downhearted by Australian Crawl, re-released on their Sons of Beaches LP, a good counter to Cold Chisel’s 1970s image of the Australian who “left my heart with the sappers ‘round Khe Sanh”.

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