

1/satu

Jakarta.

Sometimes, you just have to laugh, given the choices – e.g., step on the rat shit or step on the bat shit. Shall I give my heart to this angel or wait for the next one? You find yourself speaking aloud – to the city. A city straining; a city of affluence and power, and every step below on a sliding scale of remarkable contrasts.

Many times, you are blown away by the humble kindness of the local people in your orbit.

Sometimes, you grit your teeth as you take off your shoes and socks, roll up your trousers and wade into the flood water. Hoping something isn't going to bite your leg as you head for the stairs that lead to your comfortable apartment. Sometimes you wake in the morning, perhaps after an evening of sensory exploration in a room of beautiful marble tiles and immaculate white walls – utterly thrilled that you came – knowing that what you're experiencing was never previously possible, and that the life you led before was indeed missing something.

Jakarta? Originally named Jaya Karta in 1527 before being taken over by Dutch colonists, who renamed it Batavia. Today, an enormous, heaving mass of humanity. Hojillions. Ten, 20, possibly 30 million souls – and rising. Bodies that got rid of the colonists. (Goodbye to the 'Dutch East Indies'.) Wrapped in warm, steamy air – scented by spices and combustion smoke – and known to quickly turn into the loudest, most violent electrical thunderstorms you'll ever experience. A King Kong vs. Godzilla vibe.

Jakarta is located at the western end of Java – the most populous island in the Indonesian archipelago – which famously contains 15,000 islands and now has a population of over 275 million. Part of a country with a geo-political history that would make most Western folk whinge and whine forever about how mean the world can be – e.g., the Communist massacre of 1965 which left as many as one million dead; the tsunami of 2004 which killed nearly 130,000 people in Aceh province. "Who'd be such a fool to trust the universe?" the ancient prophet said.

Indonesia has a socio-economic spectrum of enormous range: from extreme wealth to extreme poverty, not aided by the recent corrupt regime of Soeharto, who ruled like a sultan for 32 years while overseeing a far-reaching web of notorious cronyism.

After centuries of Dutch colonisation, Indonesians endured often brutal occupation by Japan during WW2. The Dutch then attempted a comeback, resulting in a war of independence that lasted over four years. New Zealand's history seems like a far simpler story by comparison. Less bloody. More resolved? In Aotearoa, Māori might point to ingrained racism. What happens when a country gets rid of the colonists?

Indonesia had famously captured the imagination of Europeans during the colonial centuries, with tales of strange and exotic plants and animals, alternative religions, and physical delights far beyond the palette of ordinary Western experience. For the average 21st century Westerner, that is probably still true. Many come to Indonesia for an extended stay – usually for work, but it might well be food, sex, and dabbling in the spiritual or mystical that will be remembered. And, as ‘The Bajaj Boys’ – me, a lover and creator of poems, and Derek Fraser, guitar player – will discover, those vibes are still in the air.

The initial pull for both of us to come here is the securing of teaching jobs at an international school – the Kiwi School. Single for the last three years, I've taken a leap into the unknown, even selling my home as a committed gesture to get outta Dodge.

“Why the hell would you spend decade after decade of your life in the same monocultural suburb when there's a big, exciting world out there?” I blurted out one day to a group of teaching colleagues, sounding about 18. Yes, I'd done ‘the big OE’ (overseas experience) in my youth, and travelled a bit through the years, but I was fed up.

Aside from the joy of watching my daughter write and record songs, the fun of being a roadie-dad as she played gigs around the city, and hanging out with some poets, my life felt a little off. Close but no cigar, as they say. Especially after a string of lousy coffee-dates during the last couple of years. I was over Dorkland. Over, under, sideways – as the old Yardbirds song

goes. It was time to change the backdrop, as Keith Richards once said about a trip to Marrakesh.

The teachers were surprised to hear that I was heading off to a place that only vaguely registered in their consciousness. To them, it sounded like the wop-wops – a place of long-drops and riots in the streets. It was definitely time to naff off. My ticket to Jakarta via Singapore was soon in my hand. It'll be okay, I told myself. Take a chance.

Leaving Soekarno-Hatta Airport Terminal 2 on January 8, 2013, Derek, and I, along with two other teachers flying in tonight, are innocent foreigners ready to be shaped and moulded into standard expat models. Or so we initially think.

Arriving one by one on various flights, we are met by Principal Maree who welcomes us all, asking, “Are you looking forward to teaching in Jakarta?”

“Yes, absolutely!” is the collective, nervous reply – amid the noise of jet engines, honking horns, and loud, hustling voices going about airport business. Voices speaking words that none of us comprehend. A learning curve has announced itself. A school in Indonesia! Jakarta greenhorns!

Outside the terminal, a heavy blanket of warm air immediately wraps around us as we roll crammed suitcases towards a school van. An hour later, somewhere in the city, we gratefully fall asleep in strange beds.

We have a lot to learn, plenty to focus on with our new jobs. Why then, not long after meeting one balmy night in Indonesia, do Derek and I bother forming a guitar and poetry combo in a place where there is no ready-made scene? That very question is asked, by an expat of course, because the cosy, expat ‘bubble’ beckons to all. We can choose to stay ensconced in our guarded compound after work – relaxing, planning luxurious holidays, or just hang with workmates at Western-style pubs – the normal M.O.

But Derek and I soon look at each other as if to say, “What else?”

I started scribbling verse way back in '80. Having suffered from reverse writer's-block for the last few years, I have been dedicating Tuesdays to the Thirsty Dog pub on Karangahape Rd, Auckland – trying to pull a Ferlinghetti, shoot a few

‘albatrosses’. I’ve also been MC-ing, jamming with musicians, and spilling ink everywhere. And quite happy to leave my loneliness unbroken.

As I will come to learn, guitarist Derek (from Manchester-Middleton in the UK) is something of an oddity among the expat community. He’s a man with leftist politics and an eye for social and political inequalities.

So... if we’re all ‘going troppo’, pal – maybe there’s an opportunity here in the big J’. That ‘stranger in a strange land’ thing. Might as well get the notebook out of the back pocket. Who knows what might end up in there?

The suburb we will work and live in is called Kemang, named after a species of mango. Originally a *kampung*¹ with Javanese mosques, it has been a gentrified, commercial area stuffed with expats for 30-odd years. Several highly active mosques are still present, though. Kemang’s leafy, green setting is appealing, but this – as we will come to learn – is offset by the fact that it floods quite frequently during *musim hujan*² due to its location between two rivers.

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world and I’m yet to find out what this will mean.

As we will discover, we *love* being on leave from our own cultures and can’t wait to ‘take a butcher’s’ beyond the recommended, conservative ‘safety-zone’. Most expats are buzzing with the excitement of being freed from the ‘curse’ of an average wage in a Western economy. Now, if you’re a teacher, it’s an average wage in a cheap Southeast Asian economy. But if you are ‘cursed’ by running a constant creative fever, you must find a way to *scratch that itch!*

So, we decide to offer The Bajaj Boys, unavoidably to a largely expat community complemented with full maid service. Will any of the expat teachers wash their own undies? Probably not.

However, before our little venture can begin – or in fact, be conceived – we must partake in a crash-course of ‘Jakarta

¹ Village.

² Rainy season.

induction', along with all the other innocents. Some of it will be organised for us and some of it will be spontaneous and unexpected. One thing will become certain – Jakarta cannot be avoided.

2/dua

Hopes of a sleep-in and a leisurely first day in Jakarta are squished by initiation plans. The alarm is a jolt on our first 'Indo' morning and before we've barely remembered where we are, Derek and I are climbing into a van along with new arrivals; Stacey (Welsh), Martina (Irish), Brendan (Kiwi) and (husband and wife) Rocky and Angie (also Kiwi). Ahead of us are a few days of activities organised by school Principal Maree.

"*Selamat pagi!*"³ she says. "Who's done any work on the local language?"

Actually, there's no pressure to learn Bahasa Indonesia because English is the language used at school, but we soon pick up words related to the time of day, such as: *siang, sore, malam*.⁴ And words that describe people, such as: *mas, mbak, ibu, pak*.⁵ So, expat newbies – who's still young? Who's an old fart?

One important phrase is *terima kasih*.⁶ We'll be using that one a fair bit.

The most common question we will be asked by local people is: *Apa kabar?*⁷ We must always answer: *baik!*⁸ – as Indonesians invariably do.

We have fun saying the single word *apa?*⁹ to each other.

Importantly – as foreigners – we are all known as *bule*. (Pronounced boo-lay.)

³ Good morning!

⁴ Noon, afternoon, night.

⁵ Young man; young woman; mature woman; mature man.

⁶ Thank you.

⁷ How are you?

⁸ Good.

⁹ What?