

BALI FEVER

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Nancy was going over the review from a seasoned wanderlust enthusiast as the airplane pilot announced over the loudspeaker that landing would occur in 30 minutes. The part that captured her attention said thusly, “Bali fever has engulfed quite a few of the gen X folks as it offers convenience and low economic cost. This could be considered the second wave of the penetration of Southeast Asia. The first one relied on the use of cheap local labor for manufacturing. Penang, Indonesia, is the archetype. Now low cost of leaving is attracting members of the service sector.

Hence the word has quietly propagated among the cognoscenti that widespread internet access and inexpensive rents cohabit together in a tropical heaven turned into a tourists’ haven. Work from home, a good spillover from the Covid-19 quagmire has allowed many expats to turn away from the doldrums of commuting while achieving the same output in a friendly environment. It’s the kind of catnip that once one tastes it, the idea of going back to the traditional 9-5 cloistered in an office sounds like a rancid alternative. However, since we are social animals, we have transformed fellowship around the office coffee machine to another venue, like the internet cafe. A secure environment adds another level of enticement.

The island of Bali offers that and many more. An enclave of homogeneous Hindu culture in a majority Muslim nation, it has become iconoclastic. Its ubiquitous home temples pepper the landscape and other majestic ones, samples of great architecture also dot the decor. This island has corralled its resources to cater to tourists. Massage spas and inexpensive restaurants serving succulent dishes go a long way toward solidifying the narrative that it’s a great destination. Its beautiful sandy beaches gifted with aquamarine waters add the gravy. Those whose lifestyle fits well with this ecosystem becomes attached to it like a Velcro. Bali with a very friendly and polite populace elevates hosting to an art form and the harmony of man with nature into a national act of faith.”

Such plaudit made her long route from the east coast of the US to the airport in Bali worth its while. A while that took 2 days by plane with a stopover in Doha lasting 9 hours. Nancy, a freelance journalist cum writer, young, unattached, adventurous, decided to take a gambit and jump into this new milieu especially after a steep hike in her rent for her flat in Fort Lauderdale. She had also read that this place was so attractive that other young professionals fleeing the menace of the Ukraine war were also flocking to its shores. As she disembarked the plane and made her way through immigration and past customs to have another long wait to pick up her luggage, she bumped into an Aussie who had sat just in front of her from the trek of Doha to Bali.

“Mate, this was a long ride and now it’s taking forever for my luggage to come.” He said that to no one in particular but nonetheless his eyes crossed Nancy’s. He had an Aussie accent that she detected rapidly, having spent a few months there right after college graduation in what amounted to her Bohemia debut. The dude, or more specifically the mate in the colloquial pattern, had a dark brown hue, mimicking her own chocolate tan.

“Such a drag indeed.” Her response was expressing a mix of relief for reaching her final port of entry and some frustration at another slow grinding process before full fruition. Just as soon as she uttered these words, her luggage came and as she reached to grab it, “Let me help you,” he offered, and he loaded it into her carriage. “Thank you very much,” she said with a nice grin and a surprising mild flutter in her chest. He must have waited a long time to get his for she didn’t see him again at the long time for customs. She wondered if their paths would cross again.

She didn't have to wait long for that as both met again two days later at the ticket line for the Monkey Forrest in Ubud. "My name is Monti, what is your lovely name?" His expressive mode was a deft conflation of subtle gumption without any trace of smugness. This usually reeks of flirting with a nice patina of flattery. Then began a conversation and learning process about one another. He was working in IT and the rave of the day, Artificial Intelligence, and encryption, for an upstart and so long as he had access to a large bandwidth, it mattered not where he was working from.

Monty and Nancy shared the same free spirit. The visit at the park opened a spontaneous conversation about the cleverness of the macaques alternating from playfulness to impishness but always displaying great intelligence. They also bonded from sharing similar experiences in a society that normally treats members with their backgrounds as second-tier citizens even when they are talent-laden. In a seamless manner, from the jungle habitat, they continued over lunch at the close by Monkey Legend, a quaint restaurant with the original idea of carving their logo on the side of a coconut served as a refreshment.

Life in Bali revolved around acquainting the self with the scenery, navigating the teeming mopeds causing traffic jams, finding gems such as restaurants offering tasty menus at the lowest price, exploring the wonders of the place, the falls, sacred temples, coffee plantations, luxuriant vegetations. Along the way discovering each other, deciding if the stay is temporary, permanent, whether to learn the local languages, Balinese and Indonesian. Just as important was the consideration whether full integration in the society is advisable, possible. The usual chasm of locals decrying gentrification versus the need to have foreigners bring hard currency were all subjects of profound discussion because every now and then an irate local driver would make the comment about "arrogant foreigners driving carelessly their mopeds."

In the meantime, coexistence between the two groups was very peaceful and harmonious. Fellowship entailed by necessity infusion of different mores into the milieu, foreign music, skimpy attire by women instead of the conservative dresses, partying at local clubs and of course fornication for its own sake. Nancy and Monty were part of a group that normally wasn't so inclusive and they were judged by locals as bona fide members of such group despite some inherent divisions. It didn't seem to matter much as they socialized with one another and above all, true harmony did exist among all the groups. Nancy found the environment stimulating enough to pulse her imagination to write a novel between a devout Hindu of Balinese ancestry and an atheist born and raised in Jamaica where her father was from, in Fort Lauderdale her recent city called home.

Nancy and Monty developed a relationship of friendship with benefits, a norm among Westerners of casual sex among friends without a necessary firm commitment in the relationship at the time of such indulgence. Like trial by error before proceeding to the next level of sentimental concordance. Nomads as they were, not sure what or where tomorrow would bring or lead, they were concentrated on the present, leaving very fluid the form and shape of the future. In the meantime, they were attached to the place like a Velcro and to each other by an invisible tether because of mental kinship.

Their Bali fever was fed by the spices of the healthy foods they kept ingesting, the very inviting mannerisms of the locals, their awestruck appreciation of the awesome sunset from the perch of a dormant volcano and the stunning sunset from the vista of a pristine lagoon. Somehow, something seemed to always play the role of an aphrodisiac, either by itself or in combination. That was a state of affairs very pleasing to both souls. Not surprisingly in a dispatch sent to her local paper as part of byline she wrote from time to time, she expressed the following sentiments, as a pith of her proposition, "What does it mean to be an expat in a tropical marvel? Highly

educated professionals who decide to elope and find solace in a quiet environment with a completely different culture thread a delicate line between a gleeful welcome and baleful resentment to the extent that harmony doesn't reign. It becomes an arduous task not to take for granted the inviting predisposition either innate or borne out of economic necessity. A reciprocal covenant constantly nurtured becomes necessary to serve as liniment or juice.”