

BALI, HI!

Part II

Welcome to the 'Hood

My first week here was spent getting acclimated. Since I'm going to be here for a while I don't have to run myself ragged like a typical tourist, wondering if things are really that different and odd or whether it's the jet lag. I suspect that's why people take more photographs at the beginning of a trip—they know they won't remember any of it. If there's one compelling reason we should be spending less money on the space program and more on time travel it's because it would let us leapfrog over the time zones rather than wander through them, putting an end to jet lag, I think. I'm waiting for Stephen Hawking to get back to me on this before notifying the Nobel committee.

Traffic here is incredible. The roads are narrow, the potholes are the size of Rhode Island, and there's only one traffic regulation: drive on the left. Okay, so it's a suggestion and not a law. Picture Brownian Motion with motorbikes playing the part of the molecules. The drivers wear helmets during the day but not at night when the police can't see them. Not that it matters since most of them wear baseball batting helmets. Barry Bonds would feel right at home here except that instead of chewing tobacco they chew betel nuts, which may go a long way towards explaining the traffic patterns.

The exhaust fumes will choke you in Ubud so it's always wonderful to turn off the main road and walk into the rice paddies towards the cottage. Suddenly the air is fresh, clean, and humid, with only occasional whiffs of smoke. Smoke, you see, is common in Bali since people burn their trash in front of the house, burn the

rice fields after the harvest, and burn their dead, but more about that later. If Bali is nothing it's a pyromaniac's paradise.

I had the hardest time getting used to the money. It's always tricky adjusting to a new currency—you spend the first few days, at least, carefully examining each coin and bill while trying to figure out which is worth five whatever-they-use, but this is different. When I got here the exchange rate was 8500 rupiahs to the dollar. It's great. For about \$117 you can be a millionaire. And do it without having to watch Regis smirk or point. Of course you don't get to use a lifeline when you're standing at the ATM trying to decide how many rupiah you want, but you can't have everything.

Obviously nothing costs a rupiah. In fact the smallest coin or bill I know of is Rp50, which makes me wonder why they don't just chop a few zeros off the money and make life easier. I went into immediate zero overload—I couldn't tell a 1000 rupiah note from a 10000 rupiah note from a 100000 rupiah note. It doesn't help that they don't use commas on Indonesian money. I was told to tell the bills apart by color but most of the money is so worn you couldn't tell what color it is if your *sate* depended on it.

All this is a problem not just because you don't want to throw money away, but because no one wants the Rp100000 notes. The banks and ATMs give them to you, the shopkeepers refuse to take them. Hell, they don't usually want to take a Rp50000 note. Thus you end up hoarding small bills and breaking large ones whenever you can. And you find yourself walking around with a huge wad of money getting very tired of the traditional Balinese greeting of “Is that a dollar fifty in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?”

To make things worse, if a grocery store doesn't have small change they give you a piece of candy instead. Sure, it tastes better than the bills, but if I wanted candy I'd buy some. Besides, they don't give you a choice of flavors. I need to pay closer attention because the coffee ones might be Rp25, vanilla 50, and that odd-tasting tropical something-or-other is their way of saying “Don't come back until you have small bills.” But I have a plan. I'm not going to eat my candy change. I'm

going to save them and pay for my next grocery purchase with them, though something tells me that if I do they'll give me my change in grains of rice. Maybe I should suggest to the government that they do away with money altogether and switch to candy currency. The bigger the candy the more it's worth. I'm sure I can get the Nestle lobby to rally behind me on this.

One thing I've learned to do is raise my eyebrows to say "Hi" instead of waving. That's how they do it here. I'm getting used to it but I still feel like Groucho Marx as I walk down the street lifting my eyebrows at people. If I come back to the states walking in a crouch, smoking a cigar, and raising my eyebrows at everyone don't be alarmed, just try to cast me in a remake of *Duck Soup*. Or maybe a Vlasic pickles commercial. I especially feel strange doing this when I greet a woman because it feels like I'm leering. Okay, so I am. They don't need to know that.

I was sitting on the veranda the other day when two guys pull up on a motorbike. They were neat, clean, and polite. They walked up to me, introduced themselves, and started pulling out semi-official-looking laminated documents. In Indonesian, of course. I admired the nice lamination job, which of course made it appear as if I was studying the documents. The papers looked suspiciously like an Internet joke someone had forwarded to me a couple of days before but I couldn't be sure since there weren't any >'s in front of each line.

Their English was just good enough to get across that they were soliciting donations to fight narcotics. Or maybe they wanted to buy some, I can't be sure. I shook my head "no" and they looked at me sadly like, "That's a mistake." I figured if they actually were real, it would be a mistake. And if they weren't, well, it still could be.

They handed me some receipts showing that other people had given 50,000 rupiahs and 70,000 rupiahs and I'm pretty certain it was their handwriting but how could I be sure? After all, the previous day's *International Herald Tribune* (motto: "Some of the news a few days later") said Indonesia is still high up on the list of corrupt countries, close behind Nigeria, Yugoslavia, and New Jersey. Okay, so New

Jersey isn't technically a country, I still say any place where they speak a strange language and wear really weird hairstyles is foreign.

Just to be safe I gave the guys Rp20,000, or about \$2.35. They pursed their lips and shook their heads sadly as if to say, "Baby needs a new sarong, you know?" But they were cool. They politely shook my hand, got on their motorbike, then drove down the road, making a note to come back often, I'm sure. A minute later they passed me as they headed out to the main road. Why they didn't stop at the other houses around here is beyond me. Okay, so it isn't. Is it my fault I was the only white guy sitting on his porch with a flashing neon arrow over his head that said "Sucker"?

As I watched them vanish down the dirt road through the rice fields I sat back in my chair and smiled. Now that the Welcome Wagon had stopped by to visit I could move onto the next phase: playing tourist.

Excerpted from *If It's Such a Small World Then Why Have I Been Sitting on this Airplane for Twelve Hours* by Mad Dog. Available from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), [Lulu.com](https://www.lulu.com), or [IfftsSuchaSmallWorld.com](https://www.IfftsSuchaSmallWorld.com).