

[Will Tourism Trample Bali's Hindu Heritage?](#)

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MY TURN

## Will Tourism Trample Bali's Hindu Heritage?

It may take more than borrowed sarongs and behavior drills to curtail cultural pollution

I Made Suryasa

Bali is a Hindu outpost in the world's biggest Muslim country, Indonesia, with more than 200 million people. It is impressive that this tiny island of 2.7 million, only 90 miles long and 50 miles wide, survived numerous attempts to convert her inhabitants to other faiths. Retaining our Balinese Hindu belief system has been a challenge. Today, perhaps the biggest challenge of all is tourism.

For hundreds of years the Dutch colonialists kept a hands-off policy in Bali, exploiting instead the Java and Maluku islands, rich in spices, tea and rubber. Attitudes changed in the early 20th century. The Dutch attacked and razed Bali's five major palaces. After slaughtering the Rajahs and their followers in the Puputan (Death March) of the major capitals of Denpasar in 1906 and Klung Kung in 1908, the Netherlands strove to change their image. They created an intensive promotion of Bali as an " Enchanted Isle," "The Last Paradise," etc....to lure visitors to come experience the artistic, traditional Balinese

way of life. Around 1914 the Dutch steamship line KPM brought Bali's first recorded tourist.

As early as 1917, reports began to circulate that Balinese culture would be ruined by tourism. In the 1950's the Governor of Bali was horrified to discover tour companies promoting Bali as "The Island of Bare Breasts." Cultural preservation and certain types of tourism usually do not work together. Despite this, we Balinese understood time and again that we have something valuable that we wanted to share, but also to try to preserve.

Mass tourism was recently introduced to the island by an Indonesian government desperate for foreign currency. It is now unrealistic for us to close the island to tourism. Fortunately, tourism with a cultural orientation can help to maintain culture continuity and also give the Balinese, historically an agricultural community, an alternative way to make a living. So, we try to teach visitors how to behave when visiting spiritual/religious events, and to encourage tour operators and hoteliers not to desecrate any artifacts that have religious meaning. We are a very open society, and we treat all visitors to the island as tamu, guests. We greet and entertain our guests with our traditional values and hope that our guests behave themselves.

We also tried to maintain cultural continuity by setting aside an arid but beautiful beach in the south as a tourist resort, to restrict close daily contact between tourists and the Balinese. Unfortunately this policy proved unsuccessful due to the machinations of the recently deposed Suharto government and

lack of local participation. Suharto's family and cronies bought up most of the designated "green" areas of the island. With hotel occupancy at just 76%, they announced that there were not enough hotels to house visitors, and the South Bali preservation project was scrapped. Another challenge now is to let some travelers know that Bali is not a "sex tour" destination. Research done by Bali's University of Udayana reveals that some visitors ask for "services" they find elsewhere in Asia.

It is very hard to control all tourism activities. The best that we can do is to treat situations case by case and, meanwhile, try to strengthen the Banjars, our neighborhood associations, as our last defense.

I Made Suryasa, 39, a scholar and priest's son, lives in California, teaches mask dance and conducts tours to Bali (Danu Enterpr.)