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treasure island

RUMOURS OF BLACK MAGIC ARE NOT THE ONLY CHARMS OF NUSA PENIDA



First, a confession: I have never been to Nusa Penida. I would love to but to date it remains a mystery to me, my imaginings torn between rumours of black magic and impoverishment but peacefulness too, and the calmness of lives relatively secluded from the rising stress levels of other parts of Bali.

My only first-hand knowledge of Penida is a view across the churning straits that separate it from Nusa Ceningan, a slip of an island, which is itself connected by a yellow bridge to Nusa Lembongan, the most accessible and most touristed of the three-island cluster. Apart from the traces of abandoned farming terraces that had perhaps once held cassava, and a lone fishing boat rising and falling on the swell in the middle of the channel, there were no signs of human occupation. The rock formations right along the coast at that point were pocked, razor sharp, and seemingly impervious to the ceaseless battering of the swell. We walked a little way vowing to return with more sensible footwear and found a spectacular blowhole.

At the base of these cliffs I could see a small cove banked high with sand. It filled me with an inexplicable feeling of melancholy, perhaps because it seemed so out of reach. I imagined the only way to get to it would be in a flimsy boat. The junk out-rigger that had ferried us across the Badung Strait from Sanur to Nusa Lembongan a day earlier had to negotiate a rollercoaster-like swell about halfway across, riding up the wall, scooting along the crest then down, down, down the other side, over and over without mercy. Exhilarating in its way but the thought of having to do it all over again in a few days in the opposite direction played at the back of my mind (in the end we took the speed boat. I recommend the junk). A second confession: I'm not exactly what you'd call intrepid. But this view of Nusa Penida across the strait made me want to be.

Climatically and geographically, Penida is connected more to the Bukit Peninsula than to the lush picturesque paddy fields of postcard Bali; it is a sparsely populated limestone plateau, rugged, rocky and dry. The reasons for the island's - and islanders'

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- reputation for black magic are perhaps partly connected to this distance from the Balinese "mainstream" and its idea of normality. It was for a time in the 18th century used as a penal colony and place of exile and this no doubt further contributed to its popular reputation as a gloomy place beyond the pale, the stuff of threats and nightmares.

While the majority of Penidans are as Hindu as their Balinese neighbours - albeit with proportionally sizeable Balinese and Sasak Muslim minorities - their ceremonies are quite different too, less frequent or elaborate, and the Balinese spoken there is said to be of a more ancient form, another feature of its isolation from the proper Balinese. Penida does, however, occupy an important position in the wider Balinese Hindu religious calendar, and all Balinese Hindus, at least once in their lifetimes are expected to make the pilgrimage to the island to participate in the rituals conducted there.

There are a handful of temples and other sacred sites. The most significant of these and the main destination for pilgrims is the Pura Penaturan in the village of Ped on the north coast of the island east of the main port town Toyapakeh, where prayers, offerings and associated rituals are offered to ward off illness and calamity. Legend has it that the temple, and the island in general, is the abode of the most powerful of all those spiritual embodiments of evil, known collectively as the Bhuta Kala. This is Jero Gede Mecaling, a giant thought to be responsible for many of the disasters that have befallen Bali, including plagues of rats, floods, epidemics and blights.

In contrast to the menace popularly associated with the island, in recent years Penida has become known as a bird sanctuary especially for its part in the preservation of the Bali Starling (*Leucopsar Rothschildi*) which has been brought back from the brink of extinction thanks to an innovative breeding and conservation program in which all villagers on the island have agreed to participate in exchange for increased educational opportunities for their children and support for sustainable agricultural and agro-forestry projects. Penida's location alongside the deep sea trench separating Bali from Lombok and the seasonally shifting currents that bring cold ocean waters in from the south have also made the island a magnet for divers especially those hoping to get up close and personal with manta rays and enormous mola-mola or ocean sunfish. The entire coastline of Penida - and that of neighbouring Ceningan and Lembongan - has been designated a marine conservation zone.

Back on dry land, a programme aimed at reviving the island's fast vanishing weaving traditions has also proven successful, thereby contributing to both a sense of cultural pride and household income. And just another excellent reason to hop on a boat and ride out the swell to Nusa Penida.

Written by Peter Stephenson

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