

## **Berita lagi mengenai prosedur Antrean CIQ 4 (empat) jam bagi wisatawan ke Bali**

Due to convoluted immigration and security procedures, passengers arriving at Bali's airport are now forced to queue for up to four hours before they are finally released from its insalubrious underbelly. Ours is now surely the worst airport in the world in terms of user satisfaction. Only the Russian communists during their heyday, or the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution, ever orchestrated queues like this. I think I heard someone say, "It's like waiting to buy meat in Minsk back in the bad old days."

I went to the Bali airport last Friday to fetch a friend at 10pm. Her flight was on time (9:58 from Sydney), but she did not emerge until 12:40, a full two hours and 42 minutes after she got off the plane. The experience for both my friend and I was as surreal as an episode from *The Prisoner*.



On arrival at the airport I was surprised to find the entire parking lot full beyond bursting, something I have never seen in my fifteen years living here. I didn't yet know that the parking crisis was caused by a backlog of drivers waiting to fetch guests who were basically being held hostage inside for hours. I was mystified. I was slightly amused by the mayhem even -- until it took me twenty minutes to find any kind of parking space, legit or otherwise, in which to abandon my car and run for it. Hotel vans were double- and triple-parked on every visible speck of tarmac. Cars choked the aisles between parking rows, blocking others from passing. Minivans were sitting willy-nilly in the middle of the airport's main traffic arterials. It was parking bedlam, in other words.

The parking problems were nothing compared to what I encountered at the arrivals area (above) -- which even in quiet times is already inadequate for its purpose, badly lit, dirty, cramped and seedy. I have rarely seen such a density of bodies crushing against one another in Bali. Only at the gate into Batur temple during the *odalan* after *puinama kadasa*. And at the Golkar campaign rallies I attended over a decade ago, back when Golkar was really popular. So I drifted aimlessly in confusion, hoping to find a stance from which I could catch a glimpse of arriving passengers in hopes of finding my friend. From the midst of the throng, I was hailed by an old Balinese buddy from Ubud, Wayan Elly, the son of Murni of Murni's warung, shops and bungalows fame.



Elly grinned woefully (as only a Balinese gent can) and blurted out, “I’m so embarrassed! It’s just like a night market here! Not like an airport! Like a village night market! Dirty! Crowded! Third World!” He was understandably apologetic, although he had no need to apologise to me for Bali’s failings. I’ve been here long enough to see and to tolerate cheerfully all manner of inconveniences, without gnashing a tooth or biting a nail. Then Elly explained to me that new arrival procedures had been introduced at the airport, which include fingerprinting (?!?!?!?) and photographing (?!?!?!?). As a result, the arrival process for guests in Bali was now taking two to four hours. The poor fellow had been waiting two hours already for his arriving friend, and there was still no sign of the guy, nor of any other passengers with baggage tags from his flight.

At this point, the arrivals greeting zone was nine-deep with drivers from hotels, resorts and bungalows, mashed in with an assortment of Indonesians and expatriates waiting for homeward-bound friends and family. The Balinese hotel drivers, I must say, although looking sweaty and exhausted, were somehow (as only the Balinese can be), still cheerful and rambunctious in a good way. To alleviate the boredom, they had spontaneously taken up an “audience” attitude, and were cheering and hooting, and giving “applause-o-meter” ratings to every emerging passenger and stewardess. The sexy girls got rounds of applause or catcalls or “woo-woos” in unison. The hip dudes in outfits with attitude or with surfboards and smiles, got cheers and “allez-allez-allez”. Exhausted French executives with cute collapsed children got sympathetic, “awwwwws”. And the stewardesses got standing ovations. It was spontaneous play, involving hundreds of men, with no spoken or written rules of the game, but complete consensus.



I am grateful to these impromptu entertainers, because it certainly kept me from being too angry or overly bored during the hours and hours I waited. I finally gave up craning my neck from behind a phalanx of placard-waving drivers, and strolled through the security barriers separating arrivals from arrivees, to plop down on my bottom on the floor along with a host of other foreign and Indonesian guest-picker-

uppers who had vaulted the barricades also. We were all simply looking for a place rest our weary feet, while still being able to see and be seen by passengers as they emerged. And they emerged slowly, one by one, by two, by one, over the interminable hours.

Basically, what we had here was a volatile situation, but this being Bali, it didn't explode. We had thousands of frustrated people crushed together *en masse* outside the terminal waiting for their arriving guests, friends and family. We also had thousands of people *en masse* standing in queues inside, waiting and then waiting again. They waited first to pay for their visas on arrival, then again to have their passports and visas checked, then again to have their fingerprints taken, then again to have their portraits taken, then again to have their carry-on bags x-rayed to screen for who-knows-what (as if they hadn't already been fine-tooth-combed three times by far more competent security squads at the airport they had departed from), then again to collect their bags, and finally, yet again to pass customs and get out of the Kafkaesque nightmare that is Bali's Ngurah Rai Airport today.



With my feet going numb from sitting on the tile floor, I watched elderly and disabled people limping through the exit doors looking like the followers of Moses on the brink of collapse after the arduous tortures they had just survived during their journey to the promised land. I wanted to shout "Let my people go!" but I restrained myself. I saw parents dragging, hefting, and pushing on trolleys their heaps of unconscious offspring, drenched in sweat. I saw formerly fresh-and-*chicissime* elites from the first-class front rows emerge with looks of utter mortification, eyes rolling as if to say, "I will never, ever, ever even think of visiting Bali ever again as long as I live, and I will immediately phone all my friends and colleagues and travel consultants and senators and congressmen and their aides to warn them off!"

Hauling themselves forward like oasis-seeking survivors on a desert death march, the arriving guests emerged one by one, in a slo-mo sequence from behind the glass doors. It was like a sick parody of a catwalk, or a prisoner parade in a gulag. I saw mothers holding howling, crimson-faced infants, their formula and their patience exhausted long ago. I saw business-class arrivals from Singapore with bugging eyes, and tightly pursed lips, suppressing the shock, horror and anger of having spent far more time queueing to arrive in Bali than they had spent flying there from Singapore in the first place.



As for the drivers waiting outside, some were asleep on their feet, flopped forward on the steel railings, their placards drooping. Others were sitting on the filthy floor forming impromptu support groups, heads in hands, wishing away the heat and crowds. I saw a tall and handsome expat father with his two children waiting for their mum. After looking perky for two hours, they encamped themselves on the floor at the base of a concrete pillar amid cigarette butts and ashes, the two girls flopped in the dirt like dolls in dreamland, legs akimbo.

My own arriving friend is a Scandinavian noble who long ago saw the far side of sixty. I salute her fortitude. I would not have been surprised if she had emerged on a stretcher with medics, after having been forced to stand and shuffle forward inch by painful inch, in no fewer than four different queues, for the better part of four hours, in the middle of the night without water or food. Or cigarettes. It evokes the re-education programmes that certain totalitarian states imposed on their elites and intellectuals during the darkest days of the 20th century. I am happy to report that my friend survived without irreversible damage and hauled herself forth at last from the hungry maw of Ngurah Rai Airport.

The Balinese hero Ngurah Rai himself, after whom this pathetic excuse for an international airport was named, would be rolling in his grave, except for the fact that the Balinese cremate their dead so he has no grave to roll in. I certainly would not consider it an honour to have such a substandard airport named after me, I would consider it posthumous humiliation and my soul would be restless, feeling the sufferings of these people being held against their will without rights or remedies for hours on end.



What shocked me perhaps the most, was my arriving friend's revelation during our drive home. She explained that during the entire ordeal she had witnessed within, no airport official or other person in any capacity had explained a thing, nor had anyone offered any kind of assistance to those who needed it most (mothers with babes in

arms, families with wee ones in states of hysteria, pregnant ladies, elderly guests with flagging stamina, the mobility-impaired, the distraught, the weeping, the moaning, the despondent). Nobody even offered these people a drink of water, a seat, or an explanation of what was happening to them, why, and which queue to queue in next. In fact, the situation inside was not like a queue at all. There was no room for queues. The arrivals area was a mass of seething bodies, a bedlam. A Led Zeppelin ticket line circa 1974.

And these people paid good money, serious money, to come to “paradise”. I feel very sad about this situation. Very sad indeed. And angry, after having seen all of those miserable people.

Shame on you. Shame on Bali. Shame on Indonesia. Shame on the Ministry of Tourism. Shame on the management of Ngurah Rai Airport. Shame on the Immigration Department. Shame on you all. How can this happen on an island that is awash in money, talent, charm, kindness and compassion? There are only two possible answers. One is malice. The other is incompetence.

Many people arriving around the time my friend did, had booked hotels for that night, and paid no small sum for their rooms. I saw exhausted guests of the Four Seasons, Bulgari, and Aman Resorts. And I observed some guests of Como Shambhala Estate at Begawan Giri (an über-luxe, uber-expensive, *ne-plus-ultra* resort near Ubud). They were remarking to their tired greeter-driver who after hours waving a placard still looked like a rotund laughing *Buddha à la Bali* (blessings of the Buddha upon him), that they had booked for six nights, but would in fact only stay for five, having in fact emerged from the airport, one whole day later than their booked arrival date. Having landing on time at 9:43pm on Friday, they had expected to be at the Begawan Giri by 11:15 Friday night at the latest, in time for a moonlit dip, a sip of organic juice and a good long sleep. As it turned out, they emerged from the airport on Saturday morning, and realized they would not be at Begawan Giri until after 2:00 in the morning – - and in a very foul mood and a compromised state of wellbeing. That’s a fine how-do-you-do for people expecting a luxury healing retreat on the so-called “Island of the Gods.” These earnest and polite visitors also put forward a not entirely unfounded case for suing the responsible Indonesian government departments for the cost of one night’s stay at Begawan Giri for the lot of them. That’s several thousands of dollars.

Perhaps a good international lawyer could pitch a tent in the arrivals hall at Ngurah Rai airport in Bali and trawl for clients, offering to sue the responsible agencies for the wasted hours in line due to malice or incompetence. He could encourage them to join a class action suit to be reimbursed for one-tenth of the cost of one-day’s accommodation according to the daily rate of the place they’d booked to stay. Plus compensation for pain and suffering. With many thousands of people arriving daily, that would certainly be a rather large stick to shake at the malicious or incompetent parties.

And what about the complete lack of basic human rights and freedoms extended to the thousands of people who are imprisoned at Ngurah Rai airport at any given moment, including now? No information. No basic necessities. No escape. It’s positively Kafkaesque.

*Images by yours truly.*