

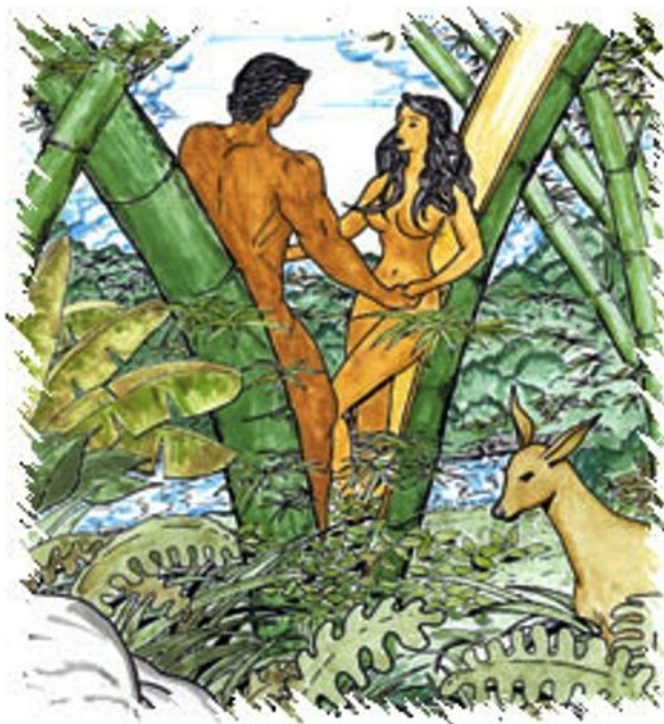
## Chapter 3: Romance in the Tropics

When one thinks of sex tourism, Bali does not immediately come to mind like the Philippines, Cambodia or Thailand. But, where there are tourists and people with money, there are going to be people working at the oldest profession. You won't find the nightlife of bars, go-go dancers and open sex for sale that you will find in these other locales, but if you look around just a little you'll find plenty of sex for sale for both men and women.

Now, this can be quite controversial, and I know a number of long-term expats who claim that Balinese women do not work in the prostitution business, but I also know plenty of Balinese guys who claim otherwise. Regardless of whether the women (we'll stick to women here as the majority of the sex tourist trade is male) are from Bali, Java or elsewhere, you can find brothels in Sanur and Denpasar and ladies openly solicit at night on the streets of Kuta. Additionally, you're liable to find that the young lady sitting next to you in a nightclub or bar is available for some nighttime fun. That being said, Bali is certainly not the place to go if you want to easily engage in sex for pay. You're far better off visiting Thailand, Cambodia, or the Philippines where the bar scene is more established and accepted.

But, there are expats that come here – both men and women – looking for romance and possibly a local spouse. This has become increasingly true over the years. While some of the cross-cultural marriages are of partners basically the same age, it is more common these days to see an older gentlemen squiring around his young Balinese or Indonesian wife on his arm, and you'll find some middle-aged ladies with a much younger spouse as well.

Let's take a look at how this works on the ground and discuss those relationships where the goal is marriage and not just a quickie.



It's easy enough to meet

Indonesians who are potential partners. If you are here on a work assignment, there are always friends, colleagues and family of colleagues. This is the easiest way to meet people. Indonesians love to socialize, and if you are even reasonably friendly, you'll be invited to weddings, birthdays, and all sorts of private and public events. Having an expat friend is for many Indonesians something of a status symbol. Yes, you too can become a star here even if back home you were nothing more special than a truck driver or a teacher. Like it or not, our white skin has some social value here.

So you can meet people at social gatherings and the workplace, but additionally you can meet people on the street, in restaurants, clubs, bars or shops. In other words, you can meet a potential romantic partner anyplace that you might meet one back home. But (there's always a but), there are a number of issues that arise in cross-cultural relationships that you will have to deal with at the start of your relationship, and some that you will continue to have to deal with over the length of your relationship.

## **Language**

Indonesia is not a predominately English speaking country. In fact, unless you deal with highly educated people or tourist industry workers, it is quite likely that you will not meet many people with more than a basic, at the most, command of English. So what are you going to do? First, learn Indonesian. The language is relatively easy to learn in comparison with Thai, for instance. Indonesian has a number of words based on one of the Romance Languages due to its colonial history – the English have been here, as have the Spanish and the Portuguese. So if you have a background in one of those languages, you have a head start on learning Indonesian.

Relationships are difficult enough to navigate without the language barrier. So, you are best off if you start learning Indonesian early. I know many expats with a minimal grasp of Indonesian, and they say that it isn't a problem for them, but based on my 18 years of marriage to an Indonesian, I strongly advise you learn the language.

## **Age**

As I noted, there is often a relatively large age gap between the Western and Indonesian partners. Is this a problem? It could be depending on how mature your partner is for his/her age.

I'll use an expat (Tom) that I knew years ago as an example of one result of a large age difference in partners. He married a beautiful young woman who was 35 years younger than him. He wanted to stay home and watch tv, spend an occasional evening out with his buddies drinking, and just generally enjoy his retirement. Dewi wanted to socialize with people her age, go clubbing, and eat out a lot (she wasn't much of a cook). Finally just to end the constant bickering over what to do each night, Tom told his wife that she could spend a few nights a week out with her friends and he would do the same. Sounds equitable? Well, she eventually met a younger expat with interests more like her own, and after a number of bitter scenes, the two divorced, and Tom moved back to the States.

Is this necessarily going to happen? No, certainly not. I have a few expat friends who have managed to navigate the age gap quite well, but it takes work and two partners who are willing to do a lot of compromising. Partners who are widely separated in age often meet with some social disapproval (usually quite muted) and this is particularly true if the partner is particularly young looking. Unfortunately, my teenage daughters have reached the age where they are very self-conscious about being out along with me in public, because of some of the comments and stares that they pick up on from both Indonesians and expats.

## **Educational background/Life experiences**

Expats are hardly a homogeneous group; you'll find the same sort of demographic spreads that you would find in any community back home. There are the rich, the pensioners struggling to get by on a small pension, the highly educated, and the technical school graduates who have worked the oil fields or gold mines for the past thirty years. If you and your spouse have a broad gap in education, you could run into some problems in dinnertime conversation. Remember, just like in any other marriage, you shouldn't expect your partner in a cross-cultural marriage to be everything to you. Cultivate some friends who have similar interests and experiences to you. An expat friend of mine once said, "I didn't marry Ina to talk about literary theory."

## Family

Yours, hers, and ours. Yes, family can almost certainly be an issue when you marry an Indonesian. Family is the most important thing in an Indonesian's life, whether they're Hindu, Muslim, Christian or Buddhist. Family is expected to stick together and support each other. If you have a child from a previous marriage and don't have regular communications, your spouse will find this strange and disturbing. If you marry a much younger partner, your children from a previous marriage may resent this and relations between you and them may suffer. Before you commit to a relationship in Bali, you need to think about how it is going to affect your family back home and how important that is to you.

If your spouse has aging, ill or poor parents, he/she may want to assist them financially. I know a number of expats who do this willingly. Often an Indonesian spouse will bring this up early in your relationship. Deal with it openly and calmly. If you are willing to help, give your spouse a set allowance for the parents-in-law and stick to it. Your partner may have younger siblings who need financial assistance for school. Again, make a decision after talking it through with your partner and stick to your agreement. It will make everyone happier.

On the other hand, I know a number of expats who absolutely refuse to give anything to their spouse's family. In some cases, this eventually led to divorce, but more often your spouse will find a way to quietly divert some of the household money to her/his family. In the cases that I know like this, the Western partner is never the wiser and life continues on in blissful peace. If you think that you are getting what you should be for the household money that you give your spouse, don't worry about where the money is going.

Finally, there is the issue of how you are going to raise your children, if you have any. Children are considered to be a great joy by Balinese and Indonesians. The whole family will take part in raising your child whether you like it or not. One of the major problems with this for the expat is the issue of sweets. Indonesians will stuff some candy in a child's mouth as soon as they cry. A lot of Indonesian children have a mouthful of cavities by the time they are six. You'll need to be clear on how you want to deal with this issue, and then once you are, you can expect your spouse's family to go ahead and do what they want anyway.



Another child-related issue that can cause some tension between spouses is discipline. Expats tend to have stricter standards of childhood behavior than Indonesians. Indonesians tend to be quite flexible with children, and if they complain or whine enough they will usually get their way. Work on discipline issues early on with your spouse. My wife likes that I'm the disciplinarian in the house because it suits her cultural makeup not to be strict with the children.

If you are married to a Muslim, your son will be expected to be circumcised eventually. This will be

a major hurdle for you if you are against male circumcision. A Muslim male must be circumcised, so you are going to need to get used to the idea. Unlike in the West, however, boys are not circumcised in Indonesia until they are aware of the significance of the action so you can rest easy for six or seven years. In many Indonesian Muslim communities, girls may be expected to be circumcised. Generally this is just a nick on the clitoris, but you should check with your spouse on this. This is a highly emotional issue for many expats and whatever your decision, you should probably not discuss it in the expat community unless you want to engage in a lot of debate.

You will need to school your child eventually. See the section on education for a discussion of this issue.

## Religion

Balinese and most Indonesians are very religious. If you marry a Hindu, you will not be expected to convert to Hinduism in most cases. That being the case, I know many expats who have become Hindus – some because they truly find the religion to be personally fulfilling, others because they think that it is expected and will make their life in Bali easier, and some because they find it exotic. Whatever the reason, it is possible to convert to Hinduism, and Balinese are always welcoming to the new convert. There are a number of ceremonies that you will have to go through, and it can be costly depending on how you do it, but the expats that I know that have become Hindus have all expressed great satisfaction with their choice.

If you marry a Muslim woman, you will be expected to convert as a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man (however, if you are a woman and your husband is Muslim, you will not necessarily have to convert as a Muslim male may marry a non-Muslim female). I did marry a Muslim woman without converting and it caused a rift in family relationships that weren't repaired until we had our first child, and I let it be known that I had no objection to my daughter being raised as a Muslim. I did convert many years later, but that was due to personal circumstances.

Converting to Islam is quite easy and inexpensive. Muslims are very welcoming of new members to the religious community. Basically all you need to do to convert is to recite the *Kalima* – There is no god but Allah and Muhammad (P.B.U.H) is prophet. Once this is done in a nice little ceremony, you will be officially recognized as a Muslim. Once you are a Muslim, you are expected to follow the following: 1) Pray five times a day; 2) Offer *zakat* – a tax for the poor; 3) Make the *Hajj* if possible; 4) Fast during the month of Ramadan. Muslims are also expected not to drink alcohol, although many Muslim men often conveniently forget this requirement.



If your spouse is a Christian or a Buddhist, you will not necessarily be expected to convert, although most Christians that I've meet in Indonesia expect their spouse to be Christian as well.

If you do convert to any of these religions, you will be expected to attend ceremonies occasionally. You will need to work out a mutually acceptable *modus vivendi* for yourself and your spouse as there are many, many

ceremonies to attend in Indonesia. My wife and I have worked it out so that I only need to attend the major ceremonies. Over the years, the community and family members have gotten used to my non-attendance at many of the ceremonies.

## **Money**

Ah money. It's a problem everywhere whether you are in a cross-cultural relationship or one with a member of your home country. Traditionally, Balinese and Indonesians are not great savers; they spend what they make. If you are a fiscal conservative, this approach to financial planning may be difficult to deal with. I have to admit that money has been the main source of contention between my wife and I over our 18 years of marriage. The best solution that we've found is that she has her household allowance, and I deal with the rest of the money.

Expats are often assumed to have a lot of money by Balinese – after all we traveled to Bali and we are building or buying a house (call it a villa and everyone will assume that you have even more money than if you say you want to build a house). Because most expats are coming from Western countries with economies more robust than Indonesia's, you will find it difficult to explain that you have limited funds (if that is, in fact, the case).

There is a dual-pricing system where you will be charged more than a local for what you want. Let your Indonesian partner do the shopping unless you are shopping in a fixed-price shop like you will find in the shopping malls. But, even in these shops, your Indonesian partner may be able to negotiate some discount or get a "free" gift if you are buying something large and expensive like a car or electronics.

A lot of the money issues between partners are related to trust. In the end, unless you want to be continually counting your funds and trying to figure out what your partner is doing with the money, you need to trust him/her. It's a hard thing to do for many of us, but you'll be better off if you learn to develop trust quickly.

## **Sex**

OK, let's get down to that facet of human life that really fascinates and preoccupies us all. Regardless of what you may have fantasized, the chances that you are going to find a sex god or goddess are really no better in Bali than anywhere else in the world. Bali has long had the reputation of the land of the bare breasts (even though the only bare breasts that you are likely to find are those of a grandmother in a remote village or a tourist on the beach in Kuta) and even now that tropical fantasy still exists.

Pre-marital sex certainly exists in Bali – many of my young Balinese friends get married after the girl is pregnant – but, you may find it somewhat of a problem if you are a Western man looking for a Balinese/Indonesian partner. Balinese guys will readily be available for sex anytime anywhere just like guys everywhere else in the world. Balinese/Indonesian women, however, may be a little more reticent about engaging in pre-marital sex. This is the old reputation/respectability dichotomy. Women have to worry about how they will be seen by family and neighbors, and the truth of the matter is unless you make a commitment, you may not get past first base in the early stages of courtship.

Balinese/Indonesians have a very earthy sense of humor about sex, and you'll find a lot of joking about sex in mixed groupings even within the Muslim community. I attended a celebration for the birth of the Prophet once in Singaraja. A well-known Muslim speaker was on the bill for the evening. I was surprised that a lot of his jokes were about sex (between husband and wife, of

course). Families often live in tight quarters so children learn about sex early and in many ways are much more mature about it than Western children. However, parents are parents around the world, and Indonesians keep an eye on their daughters, so be warned. You may end up with a very pissed-off father (along with his male relatives) at your house one day if you try to take things too far too fast.

Of course, a lot of this has to do with where your partner is from. There has been a lot written on the internet about Javanese girls who come to Bali either to find a mate or do a little business. But, while some are party girls, others are working locally in hotels or other businesses that cater to tourists. The reality unfortunately is that if you end up with a Javanese partner, many Balinese will assume that she is a hooker. You need to be aware of this and be ready for some of the snide comments that may be made to, or about, your partner. In the early years of our relationship, when my wife and I went down to the Kuta area to shop or just get out of Singaraja for a day or two, we often ran into some of these types of people.

Even if you have a Balinese partner, she may be subject to some snide remarks particularly from the groups of young men that hang around warungs. This is one of those facts of life that arise in cross-cultural relationships. Once you have children, this will change. If you have a good relationship with people in your village and your partner's family, you should experience no real problems.

Even after marriage, you may find that your partner (and I'm only talking about female partners here as that is as far as my experience goes), remains quite shy about wandering around naked in front of you. This is not uncommon so go slowly. Don't try to push your values or lifestyle on your partner. Sex is a culturally constructed concept and you need to negotiate with your partner about what role sex is going to play in your relationship.

## **Gay and Lesbian Relationships**

I'm a life long heterosexual (or a breeder as a gay friend likes to call me) so my information on the gay life in Bali is second-hand. I do, however, have a number of gay expat friends who live in Indonesia so I have some idea of the scene for gay guys. I have to say that I don't know any gay women – either expat or Indonesian. I know there is a Lesbian scene, I just don't know where or anything about it.

As for men, finding a partner is relatively easy for casual sex; finding a partner for a more long-term relationship is a bit more difficult. Generally the same issues arise in gay relationships as in heterosexual ones with the exception that gay relationships, while generally tacitly accepted by most Balinese and Indonesians, are not usually openly acknowledged. There is a large gay scene down in the Kuta area with a number of bars specifically catering to gay expats and tourists. As a friend said recently, you can tell who is gay by just exchanging glances.

## **The Short and Skinny**

If you come to Bali looking for romance, you'll most likely find it. It may not necessarily be true love in the commonly accepted Western sense of true love, but it can be and it can be great. I've been married for 18 years to the same lovely Indonesian woman, and while we've had our trials due to cross-cultural misunderstandings, I'm here for the long run. So hang loose, take your time, follow cultural rules and standards, and enjoy yourself.