

Balinese Street Photography Selection - Nick Burgoyne

Although Bali is a modern country, with fast cars, computers and shopping malls, in the countryside away from the tourist areas, Bali is still rather quaint. It harkens back to the rural idyll of the beginning of the 20th Century where people still ploughed with animals, bought all their provisions from local shops and markets, and gathered in communal spaces to discuss the daily lives unfolding around them. This affords a fantastic opportunity for street photographers from western countries because myriad fascinating scenes are played out in plain sight.

Although there are lots more cars here in Bali now than when I was first here 30 years ago, the predominant form of personal transport is still the motorbike. Typically one might see four or five people on a 100cc scooter and there is a very lax application of the laws regarding their use by children.



This is one of my favourite photographs, taken in the hills of Penebel. Every figure in this photograph tells a story. The inquisitive young girl clinging to her father, his resignation at having to go shopping at this time, the tiny child sitting in the foot well, engrossed by some tiny detail and the tired but incredibly sensual woman they are about to collect from her shopping trip.



It is not unusual to see children under ten riding motorbikes in the countryside, where the distances between dwellings and shops or schools can be quite large. Here we see two little girls discussing who will for pay the petrol!



You might imagine that these people were proceeding very slowly along the road in order to minimise the danger to their persons, but actually they were probably going at around 30 miles per hour. The wife is desperately hanging on to the umbrella and protecting herself and her husband from the torrential downpour.



Here two old friends conduct a discussion as they drive-through our village. The gentleman on the antique Honda is carrying a shrouded birdcage. Many Balinese keep captive birds for their beautiful songs and this is the easiest way to move them around.



This gentleman is a pemulung. His job is to collect plastic bottles and other valuable refuse from the villages and take them to the recycling plant. This is probably no more than a small shop where items are washed and repurposed but it might be a material recycling aggregator. His enormous load is precarious, despite not being particularly heavy. He could be carrying manner of things from cardboard boxes to old electronic equipment. The pemulung perform an essential task in Bali keeping some of the refuse off the streets.



It is not unusual to see race tracks marked out on the roads and young people gathering to compete against each other. This guy was conducting speed trials in the street outside our house. He's accelerating too hard - his front wheel has lifted off the ground, but there is something wrong with his fuel tank and petrol seems to be spraying out of the rear end. Either that or he is more frightened that he looks!



These gentlemen are on their way to work and they obviously need their wheelbarrow today. Motorcycles are the main form of transport for many things in Bali and to the Western eye the uses to which they are put can often be highly amusing!



This gentleman's job is transporting boars around the local villages to mate with sows. It seems like this gentleman and the pig both enjoy their jobs immensely.



Although computers are as ubiquitous in Bali as they are in many other countries, many systems are still somewhat mediaeval. Here we see a gentleman with a well-thumbed compilation of loose pages. The information would probably be better stored in electronic form; but this photograph is testament to a simpler way of life.



This is Gusti Ngurah Ketut Putriyasa. He is a roving plough man who rents out the services of himself and his buffalo to farmers whose rice paddies need to be tilled. This is a near natural colour photograph which benefited greatly from a circular polarising filter and a small aperture to capture the depth of this scene.



Gusti is a fantastic photographic subject. He is calm and content to stand while I shoot a dozen frames to capture the perfect illustration of his character. I feel strongly that I have achieved that in this shot.

And here he is, working with his buffalo, stirring up the mud in preparation for another rice crop. Pak Putriyasa and his buffalo spend their days in communion with the land, plodding up and down the small lanes and getting down and dirty with nature!



Although they are no longer regarded as an essential form of transport, many elderly Balinese farmers still ride bicycles from the Dutch and Japanese colonial eras. There are myriad paths in between the rice paddies. Some of these are paved but many are simply grass tracks which wind through the beautiful and charming interior of Bali itself. It is joyous to take these narrow lanes, looking at the beautiful scenery and meeting the charming people. Cycling is an excellent way to explore rural Bali and many of my favourite places have been discovered this way.



Here is a photograph of two ancient bicycles in the early morning golden sunshine. These bicycles are typical of the Dutch colonial era but are actually antique Japanese copies. They were some of the first western products that the Japanese learned to manufacture after they occupied Indonesia.



This is a bicycle repairman in his shop in Ubud. As well as selling new and used bicycles, he will repair just about any fault in any machine. For the photographer, this is a perfect opportunity to capture someone at work right from the street.



I particularly like this photograph of Pak Ketut Munro pushing his bicycle along the cement track towards his rice paddy. I love the atmosphere which comes from misty early morning and particularly the reflection of the trees which complete a natural heart shape.



This is another shot of Pak Ketut, here taking a break from his fields to smoke a clove cigarette.



And here he is, carrying a bundle of sticks from his coconut palms. They could be fire wood or perhaps split and made into something essential for his small block of land.



Here we see a couple of friends in a small village washing their family laundry in the waters of an irrigation channel which flow down from the mountains through the rice paddies. These rivers and streams are a part of the Subak agricultural system which administers the flow of water to the farmers who need it throughout Bali.

These rivers and streams are used for all manner of things; irrigation, washing motorbikes, cleaning the carcasses of pigs and cows and so on. For many people this is their only bathing water but despite what sounds like terrible pollution, the Balinese always have clean clothes!





A little further upstream, and on a different day, this young man and his son were washing catfish in the same stream as the ladies above were washing their clothes. These waterways are an essential component in the daily lives of millions of Balinese people.



The barber in our village and his latest customer are checking out the results of his cut. This was taken just after dusk, in very low light and without a tripod and with almost no natural light remaining. I had to shoot quite a few frames to ensure one was perfectly sharp. This is a typical Barber's shop with a cement floor and a hand written sign proclaiming 'Cut Hair'. The tools are simple and the skill is probably self-taught but he has a great deal of experience in cutting hair to his customer's satisfaction.



My wife spotted this young girl and her baby sister walking through this doorway, and urged to me to shoot her! She has a very good eye for a perfect scene and this is an example. I particularly like the way this girl is holding the baby and they are both framed in this beautifully decomposing doorway.

This lady is a farmer whose land borders one of the many monkey forest attractions in Bali. She is of considerable age and yet she strenuously defends her fields against rampaging monkey packs. In her hand she has a catapult which she uses to fire small stones. Even though her field is across a small stream this presents no problem to those seeking a delicious meal.





My daughter and her friends playing in the street outside our house.



Balinese people are trained to carry extraordinary loads on their heads and it is not uncommon to see temple offerings consisting of a dozen layers of fruit and flowers, or agricultural supplies and products carried aloft. It is more usual to see woman carrying things this way but sometimes men join in the fun as well!



The Elders of Central Bali

Walking in the rice fields of Bali is one the great joys of my life. Meeting people who have spent their whole lives in the same area working the same fields is quite a humbling experience.

Coming from a country where smiling at people in the street is frowned upon, it is a great pleasure to be welcomed by each and every one of them as I ask them if I could take their photograph. The majority of the people I approach are happy to be photographed, but it is mainly women who are too shy.

What I like about their faces, is that each one tells an intimate story of their lives through their wrinkles and furrows and their smiles and innate happiness are contagious.

I typically walk in the rice paddies between 6:30 and 8:30am and 4:30 to 6:30pm. Outside of these times it is really too hot to walk around comfortably and anyway most of the locals do not work in the heat of the day.

At dawn and dusk Bali has a famously beautiful golden light which filters through the equatorial atmosphere producing the most beautiful soft natural colours. Bali really is an inspiring, compelling opportunity for street photography safaris, but a deeper enjoyment is achieved when taking the time to talk to the subjects and so gain a little deeper insight into who they are.

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