Introduction: My personal Bali odyssey

The distractions of Western capitalism have reached critical mass. We need to pull in the reins and heal Bali's wounded, overcrowded, over-developed, over-polluted soul. It's up to the surfers. It always has been. There is no place on earth where surfers are more powerful within the overall community than Bali. We must come together and start throwing punches at the problems. Now that is a powerful dream. –Steve Palmer, surfer

Despite its many layers of crowded confusion, its mysterious worlds within worlds, its dog-shit-spattered footpaths, clogged streets and odious drains, Bali has always had a therapeutic effect on my soul, right from the beginning when most of the above did not apply, to the present day, when all this and much more is sadly true.

It started like this.

In early 1974 I came home from London nursing a broken heart. Although the special girl had said she'd wait for me while I had the mandatory year's working holiday in Europe, she hadn't. Her dad, who liked me better than the other guy, fronted the cash for the flight home so that I could try to win her back, but it ended in tears when I caught her in bed with my rival. In a rage, I took a pair of scissors from the kitchen and cut into neat bits the Carnaby Street dresses I'd bought her with my last week's wages, then stormed out of the flat and never saw her again.

I took a job on a Sydney newspaper, but then Albert Falzon, the seriously cool film-maker of Morning Of The Earth and the publisher of Tracks – in other words an absolute god in the surfing world to which I aspired – phoned and asked if he could buy me lunch. At some fancy city bistro Falzon offered me the editorship of Tracks, then the most exciting youth publication in Australia. I was over the moon. Within a few weeks I'd quit the city job, thrown away my tie and moved into a rented house overlooking Whale Beach, just a hop, step and a jump away from the magazine's office.

Then Albe dropped a clanger. Yes, he still wanted me to edit Tracks, but next year, not this year. He'd forgotten that in 1972 at the world surfing championships in San Diego, he'd offered the job to a Rolling Stone writer named John Grissim, and now Grissim was on his way to take him up on it. He'd pay me a retainer to hang around and write the odd article, but I'd have to find other work.

I was hanging gloomily around the Tracks office one day when "other work" walked through the door in the form of a loud, jovial, chain-smoking fellow who was introduced to me as "The Mexican". David "Mexican" Sumpter had just made a surf movie called On Any Morning and he wanted me to go on the road with him to promote it. He said: "You can write a funny story and my whole life is one big funny story, so it shouldn't be too difficult." He was delighted when I used my contacts at the newspaper I had so recently departed to get them to run a feature article titled, "Surfie film-maker lives on dog food and yoghurt to finance new movie."

The Mex and I hit the road up and down the coast, with him gluing posters all over town while I chatted up the local paper and radio station. His personal hygiene was highly questionable but he was a funny man with a good heart, and we did good business. After the Melbourne premiere he handed me $250 in cash and advised me to give it all to a photographer named Rennie Ellis, who was a partner in a company called Bali Easyrider

Travel Service. “You need to go to Bali,” the Mex said. “Clear your head of all that girlie nonsense and get some perfect waves all to yourself.”
I visited Ellis at his Prahran office, thus beginning a friendship for life, and he said he could squeeze me onto a Rip Curl trip, leaving in a few days. Return airline ticket, three weeks bed and breakfast and a motorbike thrown in – it was $49 more than Mexican had paid me, but I was in.

I knew a little – a very little – about Bali. In our last year of school, a surf chick girlfriend had told me she was going there as soon as we’d finished our final exams, probably to live. I was dumbstruck. She gave me an impossibly exotic address where I could write to her: Poste Restante, Denpasar, Bali. A few years later we hooked up again in London and she told me about the little huts in the jungle next to the perfect waves, the gorgeous, friendly people and the fragrant aroma of frangipanis, satay sauce and clove cigarettes. Albe Falzon had also told me stories about the mystical aura of the place and the incredible waves that he had found on the lonely Bukit peninsula, and Mexican Sumpter had filmed around Kuta Beach with Nat Young and Wayne Lynch, and he too had some wonderful stories.
I still vividly recall the excitement as the plane broke through the clouds on descent and we saw glistening waves breaking along the coastal cliffs to the south and to either side of the runway. And then smelling that intoxicating mix I’d heard about as soon as we disembarked and hit the tarmac, followed by the craziness of the little terminal, and waiting forever for our surfboards to appear, and the pandemonium outside as the porters and bemo drivers hustled for our buck. I loved it immediately. My ex, my now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t editor’s job and my whole shitty year in Sydney dissolved into ancient history. This was now, this was Bali.

We sat in the back of a three-wheeled bemo, facing each other on benches on either side, our boards and bags stacked down the middle. I peered through the little barred window at the driver in the cabin, surrounded by garish ornaments hung from the rear vision mirror and the roof, jabbering away to his offsider in the passenger seat, one eye occasionally on the narrow sealed section of road, his hand never far away from the horn.
Our unofficial tour leader was Brian Singer, the co-founder of Rip Curl Surfboards and Wetsuits, a new company running out of Torquay, Victoria, near the famous Bells Beach. Brian had been to Bali for the first time the previous year, so he knew the ropes, and this year he’d brought along some of his employees and some of Torquay’s better young surfers. When we arrived at Kodja Inn, not far from the beach on Jalan Pantai, the first thing the Torquay surfers did was unpack their boards and start waxing the decks and fastening cords to fibreglass loops on the tail that they would then attach to their legs by means of an adhesive strip.

By contrast, no unpacking of my single board was necessary. It had travelled naked, a solitary “FRAGILE” sticker stuck to its bottom. The previous year, in my first international travels, I had surfed all over France, Spain, Portugal and Cornwall, but I had never seen a board bag or a leg rope. After we had all enjoyed a warm-up surf in the friendly beach break waves at the end of the track, Brian Singer took me aside and suggested that since the swell appeared to be rising and we might surf the sensational new reef break discovery Uluwatu in the morning, it would be advisable if he loaned me a leash so that I wouldn’t smash my only board on the reef.

“But I haven’t got one of those thingies,” I protested.
“A rovings loop. After dinner I’ll take you over the way to meet a guy who should be able to fix that for you.”

We watched the sun set over Kuta Beach, drinking the local Bintang beer purchased from a pretty girl in a sarong who seemed to glide along the sand with an ice bucket balanced on her head, then we walked up the dusty beach track to the night fish markets where we sat on benches and ate whole fish with our fingers, washing it down with more Bintang. The entire meal cost less than a dollar. Everything cost less than a dollar!
Having settled his young family for the night, Brian came across the garden to the bungalow I was sharing with Bob Pearson, a schoolteacher from Santa Cruz, California. “Grab your board,” he said. “We’ll go see Boyum.”

On the other side of the track, perhaps 30 metres closer to the beach, we turned into a dark laneway and then immediately right into a candle-lit courtyard, from which point we could peer into a house where a mixed group of Western and Balinese men were sitting around a table. A muscular blond man with a slightly protruding jaw got up and shone a flashlight in our direction. He smiled and said: “Sing Ding! Apa kebah?”

Brian introduced me to Mike Boyum and explained my predicament. In an instant Boyum had issued some instructions in Indonesian or Balinese – I had no idea which – and two young men grabbed my board and took it away to be modified. “Take about half an hour,” Boyum said to Brian, not to me. “We’re just having some soup. Join us?”
I was rather pointedly excluded from the conversation, which was mainly about the great Hawaiian surfer Gerry Lopez, who was either about to arrive or who had just left, I can’t remember, but I was handed a small, chipped bowl of murky mushroom soup that I neither needed nor wanted after our seafood binge, but noting Brian’s enthusiastic slurping, I joined in and put away perhaps half before pushing it aside. It was enough.
I can remember laughing madly about nothing as we danced back to our losmen in the dark, me carrying my surfboard fitted with its sexy new leggie loop, Brian Singer loping along in front, saying, “Jesus, what a first night!” I slept fitfully and uneasily, and at one point, fearful of waking Bob in the next bunk, I sat outside on the porch and smelled the night air, alternately counting my blessings and imagining large animals in the garden. I wasn’t right for days, but we surfed Uluwatu the next morning, my new leash kept my board from danger, I caught a few waves that tested me, and between sessions I had time to ponder what this adventure would mean to my life.

Like so many people in those days, I had experienced a psychedelic mushroom trip upon arrival, but unlike a lot, I had few negatives to report, other than that I would have preferred to know what I was getting myself into. Although I had messed around with LSD prior to this, tripping on psilocybin was not to become part of my long-term Bali experience. On the other hand, sharing my first night in Bali with Brian Singer and Mike Boyum profoundly influenced my perceptions, not about Bali itself but about bules (Westerners) in Bali and the freedoms and opportunities this little island seemed to offer. I had just turned 23 and this was such a cool new world. I couldn’t believe how so many things – getting ditched by my girl, meeting Albe, getting the editor’s job, not getting the editor’s job, meeting the Mex, meeting Rennie – had fallen into place and allowed me to be here, in this

place, at this point in time. Of course I knew virtually nothing about Bali's incredible history prior to my arrival, nor even the much shorter history of the bule in Bali. All I knew was that for me the planets had suddenly aligned.

Brian Singer, who is still my friend, would go on, with partner Doug Warbrick, to become a multi-millionaire surf industry mogul. Mike Boyum would become lifestyle instructor to surfing's superstars while bungling dope deals for the Brotherhood of Eternal Love and other drug cartels, before dying mysteriously in the Philippines in his early 40s. Practically everyone I met on that first trip was doing something interesting, on one side of the law or the other.

On my third day in Bali in 1974, some one advised me to cycle across the cow paddock to a place called Arena Bungalows to see Dick Hoole, who could organise me a fake student pass so I could buy airline tickets at a discount. I did as I was told and called out to Dick, whom I'd met once or twice on the Gold Coast, as I approached. A genial guy who loved a chat, Dick distractedly told me to come in. I was somewhat shocked to find him stretched out on the floor of his room stuffing Thai marijuana sticks into the hollowed out balsawood stringer of his surfboard. "Won't be a sec," he said. "There's a thermos of tea on the porch, help yourself."

At the time Dick, who has supplied many of the surf period historical images for this book, was a struggling surf photographer who needed to subsidise his lifestyle in whatever ways he could. In those days we were all into that, even Brian Singer. In our middle week that first year, Brian and I and a couple of other Torquay lads travelled overland to Yogyakarta, Java – a horrendous bus and train journey in those days – to buy batik print shirts to smuggle back into Australia. I had no idea, and barely made my money back on the hideous shirts I bought, but if it was good enough for the boss of Rip Curl, it was good enough for me.

In 1975, now the editor of Tracks at last, I came back to Bali with my new girlfriend, hung out with Miki Dora, Gerry Lopez, Rory Russell and other star surfers of the day, had coffees and cakes at the cool new joint at Bemo Corner called Made's Warung, got stoned at full moon parties at the abandoned Kayu Aya Hotel (later the Oberoi) at the far end of the road, got to know the Windro family at Uluwatu, sat in the cave out of the noonday heat with Aussie mates Fly and Hocky, drank Foster's beer with the rising tide of ocker tourists at places like Norm's Bar, and pigged out on the buffet breakfast at the new Bali Hyatt in Sanur.

In 1977 I came back with another new girlfriend, now my wife, and as we hiked in on the track past Windro's village, heading for another day of perfect Uluwatu surf, the village kids began to chorus: "Pillip's got new darling, Pillip's got new darling…" That was when I knew I'd made it. Despite some embarrassment, I felt a surge of pride, a kind of belonging. I felt like I was a Bali guy, an old hand, a Bukit pioneer. I was deluded of course, but I was also enchanted by the sense of belonging, no matter how fleeting, and that has never left me. Since those halcyon days I've ridden many perfect waves and nearly choked on the brown effluent-filled water of the monsoon surf, tried to start an English language publication magazine in Bali (1984, too soon), produced, with Rennie Ellis, a guide for travelling in Bali with kids (publisher reneged, too soon), covered royal cremations and US presidential visits as a journalist, holed up in bungalows and villas and written books, taught my kids to love Bali, taught my grandkids to love Bali, leased some land, lost it, fallen out of love with Bali,

fallen back in, seen friends prosper in Bali and others fail and die. As much as we love to travel to new places, as much as we lament change, as all old people do, my wife and I feel that we are joined at the hip to Bali, and we will come here until we can no longer, for whichever reason.
So this is not a dispassionate account of Bali's recent and not so recent history. The first part, dealing with Bali before my time, a mysterious and frequently scary place where black magic and head-lopping accompanied the rise of an extraordinarily rich and enriching culture, is a history drawn from the many excellent resources available and credited up the back, but also it is drawn from a sense of connectivity, that the Bali found by the first bule intruders who washed onto the Bukit reefs from a shipwreck in the 16th century and were offered food, shelter and women, was not so different from the Bali that became the world's first centre of cultural tourism in the early part of the 20th century, largely on the back of a bare-breasted marketing campaign, if you will forgive the anatomical impossibility of that metaphor.

The second part closely parallels my personal experience of Bali's development from the 1970s to the present, but it is a much broader canvas than that. I've always been intrigued by the idea that just a few years before the international airport opened and the modern tourist boom began, Bali's village streets were awash with the blood of their own, for the third time in little more than half a century, and who could count how many times previously, in the millennium it took for Bali's warring rajas to develop some semblance of unity. I wanted to know more about those years of living dangerously that immediately preceded the mythology of the Morning Of The Earth – the surf movie rather than Nehru's original 1950 "morning of the world" description – and fortunately I was able to find people who would talk about those sad and difficult times.

From 1970 on, like so many other long term Bali tragics, I knew the names of the players – some of them were friends, some still are – and I knew at least part of many of the stories. Books and magazine articles had been written but I had never seen a thorough depiction of this vital era in Bali's history, a period during which the karmic balance of this Hindu island has been tested by unprecedented growth, fuelled by inconceivable greed.
I decided to write a Bali book that joined the dots, from the Portuguese and Dutch sailors who fell upon her shores and never wanted to leave, through the slave trading and opium years of Mads Lange to the colonial era when fey Europeans and Americans like Walter Spies and Colin McPhee discovered, nurtured and exported the culture, to the barren early years of independence that followed Japanese occupation and yet another bloody war, and the eventual discovery of this "peaceful paradise" by baby boomer hippies and escapees from the war in Vietnam.

I wanted to tell all the stories – or as many as the protagonists would allow – and place them in an historical context that would perhaps make all of us who were around for part of this realise how lucky we were, and for those who weren't, but now love Bali, realise what went before, and what went right and what went wrong, and maybe consider more carefully their roles in what comes next.

This book has no agenda other than that. I genuinely love Bali and have for some 40 plus years with no hope of change. Good and bad shit has happened here and it is all part of the

story. For me it has possibly been the most adventurous part of a fairly adventurous life (so far), and my purpose in this book is to document the grand adventure of how we, in our lifetimes, helped make Bali what it is, for better or worse, and how those who preceded us weren't always so fucking smart either.

In 1936 Charlie Chaplin declared: "Bali is ruined." He was only half wrong. But there is always hope. Bali exudes that.