

Paradise lost

Specialtribute

Humanity in the midst of horror, hope in the midst of grief – in the aftermath of the Bali bombings, **DAVID LESER** reflects on the past, present and future of the once carefree holiday island as it takes slow and painful steps towards healing.



Tourists and traders on Bali's Kuta beach in the days before it lost its innocence. Opposite: The aftermath of the bombing which has broken the hearts of so many Australians and Balinese.



On a day of national mourning – October 20, 2002 – I flew across this burnt and grieving land in a plane three-quarters empty, bound for our other island home, Bali.

At midday Eastern Standard Time, as millions of Australians came together in heartbreak and remembrance – in churches and homes, in cities, in country towns, on beaches and farms, in parks and gardens, and beside river banks – the pilot's voice came over the intercom and asked us all, passengers and crew, to observe a minute's silence. I looked over the empty desert salt pans and cried.

How easily the tears are flowing now. The day before my departure, I had had a farewell drink with a journalist friend who, over the past 30 years, has reported on just about every human catastrophe you can think of – genocide, war, famine, insurrection, terrorism, natural disaster – and managed to cover them all with distinction, although, it should be said, a fair dose of necessary detachment as well.

Not now. Now she can't stop the tears. Now she feels she is crying for every human horror she has ever witnessed, for every child she has seen lose a parent, for every parent who has seen a child go before them.

I know my father and I were thinking much the same thing earlier that day as we sat in a car listening to the words of a song, *Fields of Gold*, recorded by the late Eva Cassidy. My father had just come out of hospital and I wanted to drive him home before leaving for Bali. So we sat there, father and son, holding hands and crying together as the melody wrapped us in its afternoon glory.

Many years have passed since those summer days

*Among the fields of barley
See the children run as the sun goes down*

Among the fields of gold.

This was to be my fifth visit to Bali. Nearly 30 years earlier, I had performed an Australian ritual by choosing Bali as the first place to holiday without my parents. I had landed in the bustling dirt alleyways and sidestreets of Kuta and Legian, and immediately discovered the joys of the 24-hour international party. Over the next



10 days, I had seen my first cremation ceremony and cock fight, learnt to tie my first sarong and bargain (for more than two days!) for my first prized possession – an exquisitely carved teak chess set.

In the shade of hibiscus and frangipani trees, I had discovered the joys of communal losmen living, outdoor showering and the art of squatting, rather than sitting, for relief! Barely 18 years of age, I had had more fun than I'd ever experienced before and become more sick than I'd ever thought humanly possible.

Twenty years later, I returned with my

wife and children for two months and rented a house outside Ubud, overlooking the beautiful but contaminated Ayung River. In those eight weeks, my children learnt to speak a little Bahasa Indonesia, perform some of the shifting movements of Balinese dance and attune their ears to the fugitive, crashing sounds of gamelan music.

While they played, my wife and I investigated the other side of this luscious canvas for a story I was writing on Bali. From that perspective, the island didn't look too good. Sewage oozing out of the

soil, excrement spilling from septic tanks, rubbish dumps sitting like smoking tanks near hotels and restaurants, bacteria levels in the water way above World Health Organisation standards – all this and more because of a terrifying combination of greed, ignorance, corruption and lack of planning.

My last trip to Bali – six months ago – had tempered this bleak assessment somewhat. On assignment for *The Weekly* to do a story

What I needed to know, though, among other things, was could it survive this? Could it survive the clever evil that exploded in all our faces on October 12, 2002?

TWO MONTHS BEFORE TERRORIST bombs tore through the Sari Club and Paddy's Pub, forever destroying our innocence and our notion of utopia, a giant turtle was slaughtered on a beach near

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on a Balinese yoga and spa retreat, I was reminded that here – in this place that India's first prime minister, Nehru, dubbed "the Morning of the Earth" – one could still derive more gratification than practically anywhere in the world, not to mention beauty, pageantry, ritual and magic.

Somehow, the Balinese had been able to absorb and integrate it all – Hinduism, Islam, colonialism, Soeharto-led cronyism and corruption, tourism, globalism – and still retain their uniqueness as a people.

Sure there were touts and spivs on nearly every Kuta corner, but here was possibly the world's most exotic location on our doorstep, a Hindu-animistic island in an Islamic sea, a museum of ancient Javanese culture, a flourishing temple-based society of princes, priests, scholars and artists, as well as an exotic fantasy land where westerners could find spiritual harmony, physical pleasure and a cheap holiday at the same time.

Klungkung, the ancient capital of Bali, about 25km north-east of Denpasar. The turtle apparently had a swastika – the Hindu symbol of unity – naturally marked on its belly.

An endangered animal used for important ceremonies, the turtle – or more specifically this turtle – is now seen by the Balinese as the first warning of approaching calamity. The turtle had come to save Bali but, instead of heeding the warning, a group of youths from a nearby village had killed it.

A week later, a second warning was issued when, at midnight, in the temple of Klungkung, a wooden bell chimed. There was no one chiming it.

On October 6, a third warning came in the form of a white ring around the sun; and then, three days later, a fourth warning: a small earthquake which shook the region around the capital, Denpasar.

The Balinese, of course, see spirits and

Opposite: Tired officials take a moment for rest and homage amid the remnants of the Sari Club.

Left: A banner strung across the entrance to Puputan Park in Denpasar tells the world how the Balinese people feel about the tragedy that has changed their island for ever.



omens everywhere. Ghosts sitting in the forks of trees, singing. Rain falling in temple grounds during the dry season, black witches crossing the waters to darken people's doors.

Yet on the night of October 12, some westerners believe the spirits were talking to them as well. Judy Chapman, a Byron Bay author, was in the central foothills town of Ubud when she saw a snake outside her room. She couldn't sleep for the rest of the night. Over in Uluwatu, the site of a famous 11th-century temple, Kaz Toupin, a yoga instructor, also from Byron Bay, was lying awake listening to the pounding of the waves. She says it sounded like war.

Which it was. And it was declared with a sudden, terrible fury exactly one year, one month and one day after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

Anak Agung Ngurah Rai Girigunadhi, a member of the most prominent royal family in Bali – his twin brother is the prince of Tabanan – was in his family's palace in Krumbitan, 35km from Kuta, when he heard the blast. "It was like thunder," he told *The Weekly*, "and in my heart I was happy because I thought the next morning there would be rain."

In Denpasar, Rai's sister, Agung Kartini,

heard a noise and thought it was her nephew falling out of bed. Down the road in Kuta, a Balinese grandmother was actually shaken from hers. Over at the airport, eight kilometres from the Sari Club, Jill O'Connor, manager of the exclusive Downtown Apartments in Seminyak, thought a car had just backfired in the carpark. Five minutes later, she got a call telling her the Sari Club had just been bombed. She didn't know whether it was from the air or from the ground. She had just farewelled 30 Australian footballers, who themselves had just said goodbye to four of their mates. The four were at that very moment inside the Sari Club.

Up in the sky, on board QF67 from Melbourne, Asif Mehrudeen, an Australian of Fijian extraction, was flying into Denpasar to take up his new position as chef with Downtown Apartments. He looked out his window and saw flames. He ►

PICTURE MEDIA. MARK GERRITSEN.

A time of mourning

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2002

US warns Indonesia terrorists plan to attack tourist sites – it has suspected since August that westerners in Asia are at risk. The Australian Government doesn't upgrade tourist warnings.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 12

In Bali, terrorists place bombs in a van parked outside Kuta's Sari Club and in Paddy's Bar, opposite. At 11.30pm, the bomb in Paddy's is detonated; soon after, the Sari Club explodes.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 13

Australia awakes to the news that 192 people are dead and 325 injured in the bombings. Hercules aircraft leave for Bali. In Kuta, 250 shell-shocked Australian volunteers help in hospitals.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 14

At 2.30am, the first Hercules arrives in Darwin with 15 injured. Five hours later, two more arrive with 37 victims. At 1pm, a fourth Hercules lands with 12 casualties.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 15

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer names Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist network as the crime's main suspect. A 126-member, multinational team of investigators arrives in Bali.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 16

Prime Minister John Howard offers \$2million for information that will lead to the capture of the Bali bombers.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18

Islamic cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, the leader of the radical group, Jemaah Islamiah (JI), is taken to police headquarters in Jakarta. He refuses to answer questions.

thought locals were burning off in a paddock.

We all now know what horrific slaughter those explosions caused on Jalan Legian, near the place the Balinese refer to as *krodit* or "Confusion Crossroads". (It was named so because of how people lost their sense of direction at the intersection near the Sari Club.) So powerful was the second blast that a piece of flesh was found a few days later on a rooftop television antenna nearly two kilometres away.

Bodies had been blown apart or incinerated on the spot, arms and legs and heads torn off, corpses charred and disfigured beyond recognition. People were running, screaming, bleeding, burning, vaporising, dying in their tracks or in the arms of their rescuers. Hotel lobbies were turned into emergency wards, refrigerated fish trucks and ice-cream vans into morgues. It was Belsen all over again, except that these were not the casualties of World War II, but rather our mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, friends and colleagues, all having fun in our favourite tropical destination.

It took days for the horror to begin sinking in, although there's a strong chance it never will, fully. Families were destroyed

The site of the Bali bombings rapidly became a shrine of remembrance. Locals and tourists placed flowers and lit candles as they comforted each other and prayed. In early November, a Hindu cleansing ceremony was performed to allow the dead to go peacefully to heaven.



that might reveal the fate of a loved one. (At the time of writing many were still looking and waiting.) A sneaker or a necklace perhaps, maybe a ring. Sometimes the hopelessly ill-equipped hospital system made the wrong identification. *Your child is alive ... Sorry, no she's not, she's dead.* But how could you tell in this charnel house with bodies and body parts still being removed and the stench of death under your feet and inside every pore of your skin?

Peter Carrette, a freelance photographer working for London's *Daily Mail* had never witnessed anything like it in 32 years of

American woman was pregnant), were so furious at the delay that they decided to ask for the bill. Their friends had been calling from the Sari Club to tell them they were an hour late and it was time to get a move on. Lucy apologised and offered them a round of drinks on the house. They stayed.

PERHAPS IT IS ONLY IN GRIEF, OR IN the face of death, that we find ourselves drawn to the devotional. Perhaps these are the times, rather than when we are vaguely happy, that we feel our common humanity most strongly. We have less to hide, less to

"Perhaps we'd been naïve all along, but suddenly the world had changed unalterably and we as a nation were left totally gutted and inconsolable."

in an instant. Parents and children annihilated, maimed or permanently traumatised. Classmates, best friends and lovers torn from each other. A group of children lost their mothers. One man lost both his wife and daughter. Another man lost his two brothers. A family lost two sons and a daughter-in-law. A football club lost seven of its fine young men. Everyone knew someone who knew someone who knew someone else. And on and on went the roll call of dead and missing. Bridal parties cut down, birthday parties mercilessly cut short or never had. Beds never slept in. Last declarations never made.

Perhaps we'd been naïve all along, but suddenly the world had changed unalterably and we as a nation were left totally gutted and inconsolable.

In the grim, unspeakable days that followed, hospitals overflowed and family members and friends searched frantically for a telltale mark, an identifying feature

international journalism. "It was the worst carnage that I have ever seen," he told *The Weekly*. "I saw so much grief, I just sat on a wall and cried."

What struck so many people, of course, was the chilling arbitrariness of it all. You hated the song, so you left the dance floor and died. You decided on an extra-long shower before heading out and you lived. You stepped out of a taxi and into the arms of death, or you got caught up somewhere else, another restaurant, another bar, and you saw the sun come up next day.

Lucy Lazita, the maitre d' of Bali's most stylish restaurant and bar, KuDeTa, believes she inadvertently saved 10 people's lives simply because the kitchen couldn't cope with the demand that night. "We had so many footballers in here, including 50 from a Singapore club, that all the dinners were late," she says.

Four people in particular, an Australian couple and an American couple (the

defend, and so we find ourselves more open to the pain of others and of the world.

On my second day in Bali, I joined a large public ceremony as it made its way along Jalan Legian, the once humming lifeline of Kuta and Legian, towards the burnt-out shells of the Sari Club and Paddy's Pub. All around me were floral wreaths and messages of condolence, and hundreds of Balinese people in sombre procession – men carrying flowers and wearing T-shirts saying "Together For Life", women holding hands or carrying their infants, older children in their slipstream, so quiet and so beautiful it was enough to wash your eyes clean.

Suddenly, the silence was broken by a primal, anguished scream. It was a Balinese man wailing himself into a trance for his lost wife. All you could do was stand and listen and bow your head. Next to me, a Balinese woman stared blankly at the ruins. She had been in the Sari Club, but somehow escaped with just burns to her arm. ►

PETER CARRETTE. ICON IMAGES.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 19

The first body is flown home for burial. It is Angela Golotta, 19, of South Australia.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 20

At our National Day of Mourning, hundreds of thousands of Australians wear sprigs of wattle and come together in an expression of their shared grief.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 22

Governor-General Peter Hollingworth visits the Bali bombsite and lays wreaths.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 23

Police release a dramatic photograph of three suspects driving away from the Sari Club.

Eventually we found ourselves at Ground Zero and, as police and security looked on, we sat down in front of the twisted wreckage to pray or meditate or simply pay homage to the lost and broken-hearted. It felt, as Allan Rogers from Portland, Victoria, put it later that evening on the beach, "like everybody had just become one".

Allan had turned up at Sydney airport on Sunday morning, October 13, with his partner and friends, ready to fly to Bali for their holidays. When told about the bombing, the group had decided, after a couple of hours of intense discussion, to press on with their plans. They're happy they did.

"Friends in Australia were telling us to get out," Allan says. "Why? We have paid our respects twice since we got here ... and as much as it has taken a tragedy for this to happen, everyone has come together. It doesn't matter whether you are Americans, Australians or Balinese ..."

I felt this acutely when I met Mustafa Sumer and his cousin Kursat at the Hard Rock Hotel in Kuta, the place where daily consular and media briefings were held.

Writer David Leser (centre) joined the hundreds of grieving friends and relatives in the stricken area. The atmosphere of sadness and regret was palpable, the only comfort drawn from being together. As one mourner said, "everbody had just become one".



tender, unforgettable moment, their suffering had become ours.

It was the same with David "Spike" Stewart, who lost his son, Anthony, in the Sari Club, four years after Anthony's twin brother, Rodney, was killed in a car accident.

In his shorts and thongs and trademark Akubra hat, "Spike" had become a kind of unofficial spokesman for all the grieving families here in Bali. Now, over a quiet cup of coffee, his desolation is almost too unbearable for words.

melting, you had to hold your hands up to try to shield yourself. When we left, there would have been still another 30-odd people at the base of that wall screaming, but there was nothing more we could do."

So many acts of heroism, small and large. One man was walking towards the Sari Club when he got knocked to the ground by the force of the blast. When he looked up, there was someone in front of him on fire.

Within a split second, he had rolled

"We found ourselves at Ground Zero and, as police and security looked on, we sat in front of the twisted wreckage to pray, meditate or simply pay homage."

Australians of Turkish/Cypriot extraction, Mustafa's three brothers, Ali, Ertan and Behic, had all been in the Sari Club on the night of October 12. Somehow, Ali and Ertan had managed to escape, although with shocking burns, gaping shrapnel wounds and permanently shattered eardrums. Behic had not been found and even though Mustafa, his eldest brother, was still clinging to the faint hope he was alive – *he might have lost his mind and wandered off into the paddy fields* – in his heart of hearts, he knew he wasn't.

"We loved each other so much," Mustafa tells me, his eyes brimming with tears. "Everyone said they'd never seen a family so tight ... He was green-eyed and always smiling ... he had a 14-year-old son ... he loved life ..."

These men were strangers to me and photographer Marc Gerritsen half an hour earlier, but suddenly we were crying together and hugging one another as though we had always known them. Our hearts had suddenly cracked open and in that raw,

"Why does He take the twins?" he asks me, his sleepless eyes filling with tears, and all I can do, again, is hug him. It's not the normal thing, I know, for journalists to do – to hug their interviewees – but what else does one do in the midst of so much heartache? Perhaps volunteer for work in the hospital, as one journalist did, or seek counselling on the return to Australia as many others did. Mine was such a tiny gesture compared to what so many others did when the hour of reckoning called them.

Who will forget those six young surfies from Engadine in Sydney's south who managed to rescue up to 40 people by hauling them over a four-metre wall as the fireball rolled towards them?

"The fire was coming and coming," David Roberts told *The Sydney Morning Herald*, "and you knew that people were going to die, there was about 10 feet of breathable air down there. We had to leave or we'd be dead. I knew there wasn't much time. The heat felt like we were

around in the mud to get wet, donned a motorcycle helmet and walked towards the flames to pull the man out. How many people risked their lives in such a manner?

And then, later, there were volunteers like Sydney schoolboy Shane Ullman, who took time out from a family holiday to help in the morgue; or Australian trainee doctors Vijith Vijayasekaran and his wife, Priya, who abandoned their holiday to save dozens of blast victims, help set up a network of other volunteers and give crash courses on administering fluids to burns victims.

And hundreds of others who did what they could, in some cases actually helping to amputate limbs or peel off burnt skin, in other cases compiling lists of the dead and injured, opening their homes to the families of victims, donating blood, using their language skills to translate, sitting vigil all night with the wounded and the traumatised, or telephoning distraught family members back home.

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MARC GERRITSEN

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 24

At Parliament House, Canberra, 1000 mourners light candles for the victims.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 27

ASIO and Federal police begin raids on the homes of Indonesian-born Muslims suspected of being members of JI. Next day, JI is declared a terrorist organisation, making membership illegal.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 30

Three homes in Sydney and Perth are raided by ASIO for suspected JI links. The joint Australian-Indonesian police taskforce releases identikit pictures of three bomb suspects.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 7

A Javanese man confesses to police that he planted the bomb at the Sari. Neighbours tell police he was visited three times by Abu Bakar Bashir in the past year. Investigations continue.