

## Rain keeps the spirits at bay

By Ruth Ostrow

IT'S Galungan in Bali, a hugely important day when the gods are said to come down to earth. As part of festivities a sacred battle ensues between the forces of good and the forces of evil. A Balinese friend recommends a temple outside the town of Ubud to watch the enactment. This temple is normally restricted to locals. Tourists don't go there.

Not that there are many of those any more. I remember Ubud at Christmas break, before the bomb. It was impossible to move some days for the throng of busy shoppers and happy travellers. At my hotel today, there are six guests -- all of us on a yoga retreat.

At the exclusive resort across the road, there seems to be even fewer guests. Spa treatments are usually for guests only but any visitor wandering in is accosted and begged to eat, drink and partake in the massages the hotel is famous for.

Once-busy drivers stand like hungry buzzards around the few tourists, eager to take us somewhere. My driver tells me that he has two daughters at school. School is not free in Bali, even for the poor. He waits all day in the heat for a few dollars.

Good and evil. The great dragon-lion called a barong will shortly be fighting the darkness and will emerge victorious. It is almost too ironic to be here for this ceremony as we traverse the silent streets in search of the temple where the battle will be staged.

The sun is shining brightly. As we enter the temple it's like entering paradise -- lush gardens with hanging fruit and flowers everywhere, worshippers in coloured sarongs looking so exquisite and dignified as they kneel in homage to the gods and pray for goodness to reign supreme. Surrounding us and meandering through the temple is a volcanic pool, erupting every few seconds, mesmerising in its power.

The barong emerges and the drums bang furiously. As the procession weaves around the carved walls, people moan in awe and expectation. Those inside the giant puppet have fasted for days and are in a trance, prepared to channel the powerful gods in their struggle with the demons. As they leap this way and that, my heart pounds.

Yesterday, a friend I'm travelling with went to a world-famous astrologer who is visiting Bali from his home in Europe. Dark tidings lay in store for the West. "The eagle will fall and in its wake a time of great darkness," my friend reports in the car.

But here in this temple, there is only sunshine, radiant colours, the smell of incense and the happy laughter of beautiful children everywhere. It feels as if all will be well as the huge barong -- golden, strong and fierce -- finally arrives at the centre of the pavilion.

Suddenly there is mighty crack overhead, a crack so loud it sounds as if the volcano is erupting or there has been another bomb. Then it happens, the skies open. A huge downpour, ferocious and intense, unexpectedly falls from above.

People start fleeing, their best garments trailing behind in rivers of mud. We huddle underneath a temple awning with hundreds of Balinese.

The barong is drenched and we watch the finely crafted monster limp back to his box escorted by temple priests and their umbrellas. The temperature has dropped and we are wet and shivering with cold.

"This is really awful," I hear a Western photographer say to her colleague. "No it isn't," I say optimistically as we await the resumption of the ritual. "It's nature symbolically washing away evil. It's very positive." But the ceremony does not resume, instead the sky darkens and the rain gets heavier. It looks as if good will not be fighting evil on this auspicious day, a fact I feel mildly uneasy about despite my rationalisations.

Finally we make a dash for it, battling gushing water as we trudge towards the car. Sodden, irritable, we load in as a vendor tries to sell us bananas even in these conditions. "Please madam, plenty cheap price for you. Please." We give her money and grab a handful, closing the window at last.

"Will good still conquer evil?" I ask our driver, who doesn't answer. A few days later I will be standing at the Sari Club memorial plaque, tears streaming down my face, wondering the same thing.

I turn and look back. Families are huddled together under umbrellas waiting patiently. They seem unfazed by events. They are Balinese. They have seen many cycles of good and evil in their long history. This too, this time of uncertainty and storm, is just a cycle that has to be waited out.

Children are playing hide-and-seek and splashing merrily in the gutters, having escaped the boring rituals of church due to the rain. The coffee vendor is doing a great trade. As we drive away I get a sense of the strange ambiguity of things. And the many unanswerable questions that lay ahead under the great stormy sky.

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