



A Lombok Love Affair:
Finding a Deeper Sense of Purpose With

Voluntourism



words by Misty Tosh



wa
wanderlust

An image of Lombok magnified on Google Earth resembled a massively wrinkled turtle head: an ancient relic sporting a piercing blue eye gazing eastward toward the South Pacific. Nestled at the base of that old eye—which was really the active mouth of Mount Rinjani (3,726 meters), the second highest volcano in Indonesia—was the primitive mountain village I’d soon be calling home. I was embarking on a solo volunteering stint to teach English, do a bit of backwoods exploring and maybe even discover what I wanted to do with my life.

The choice to volunteer my time, my energy and, hell, my soul in such a distant land didn’t happen by accident. I’d spent some time roaming the exoticness of Bali a few years back, after the pointlessness of my job in film production hit me hard. On one prison-hot summer afternoon, I plotted the demise of my contract and started my research on what to do and where to go. I wasn’t looking for any ordinary booze-fueled, spy-books-aplenty seaside vacation. No, I needed something bigger, more important. Something that took me far away from the constant bedlam of my job in the entertainment industry. While I knew I wanted to do my part in the world, joining up with a big group of do-gooders to build a house in Costa Rica didn’t have the same appeal as living with a non-English-speaking Sasak family on an impoverished island did. When I stumbled across the Lombok Live-In volunteer program online and saw the type of person they recruit (the roots-seeker interested in eco-tourism, community development, organic farming and children), I knew I’d found my spot. The description had a rhythm my soul connected with. The vision of teaching school kids and nosing around what was commonly referred to as “the old Bali” was too tempting to pass up. Especially if I could spend less dough than I usually did on a rowdy weekend in Chicago. Who’s





got 2k for a weeklong build-a-house mission? I was looking to throw down less than \$500 and get a full cultural immersion out of it. Preferably someplace tropical.

Voluntourism is a current buzzword that dives straight down into the very core of wanderlust, cleverly promoting the balance between a socially responsible vacation and the local community. For the intrepid traveler, it's an opportunity to immerse oneself in a culture via a hands-on volunteering experience. For eager locals, it's a direct channel for promoting the advancement of their existence. In short, it's all about community empowerment by way of connections with outside influence and ideas.

The script usually goes something like this: After years of repetitive, often soul-killing work, someone finds him- or herself lacking in purpose and, over a steaming latte in a neighborhood coffee shop, starts pondering major life changes. The idea of digging deeper, reviving old passions and redefining new goals starts swirling around in his or her brain, and, in a burst of eyes-wide-open passion, he or she plunges ahead with a month-long commitment to deliver medical supplies in Kenya or dig water wells in Colombia. Though noble in cause, there's a downside to this new trend—these posts usually involve a wad of dough and time spent with a group of people hailing from the same place you just left. Contact with the natives becomes nothing but a series of short, well-meaning interactions before heading back to the volunteer lodge to discuss the baby your team watched drink scum water that afternoon. Sure, the impact is still huge, and you get a chance to sightsee the cultural pluses of your chosen country (think guided tours, historical sites, and national monuments), but it's extremely disorienting to leave good old first-world USA full of piss and vinegar only to arrive in some third-world locale and be surrounded by faces as familiar as your own backyard.

The thing is, you don't have to be grouped in with a slew of high-paying strangers on a give-back mission. There's a budget-friendly volunteer world out there, and the scope is vast: There are libraries to be built, street children to nurture, endangered species to save, eco-communities to learn from and impoverished minds to blister with information. The opportunity to create your own brand of voluntourism exists, and it's the kind of go-it-alone journey that counts in spades—one where you help a poverty-stricken community,

deeply connect with the locals on your own terms and really reconstruct the notion of what global goodwill means to you.

The word "danger" never entered my mind as I pitched myself via e-mail to the program director of Lombok Live-In. When confronted with the "What are your skills?" question, I drew a heavy blank. All those years I'd spent making movies seemed worthless when talking about the ability to teach English. I think my spirited desire counted for more than anything. Never mind that my SoCal surfer jargon consisted of about 20 slang words and an abundance of laughs; I was greenlit for a two-week home stay in Indonesia. Clinging to a vague idea of how to get to the remote island, I booked my flight using frequent flier miles and started packing.

I spent 36 hours, three flights and 12 time zones attempting to make sense of my own combat way of interpreting the world. Leaving behind the urban grit of Chicago felt like suspended animation, and I arrived on Lombok bedraggled but with a burning desire to immerse myself in a culture I knew nothing about. To be a single woman traveling in a Muslim country didn't even faze me. Not a single person I'd told about my plans had ever heard of the island, and that made my trip seem all the more mystical and otherworldly.

At least, those were the thoughts seesawing around in my head as I bounced off the rusty ferry in Benoa Harbor, the sketchy port of entry on Lombok. I was zipping along the bumpy dock with such purpose and intent, it wasn't until I laid eyes on a paper sign emblazoned with my name that I skidded to a stop. Mr. Ulan, a reed-thin Rinjani guide from Sembalun and one of the main fixtures of Lombok Live-In, was perched on the edge of my rickety ride—a tiny moped. I'd have had no qualms if it weren't for the fact that I was toting a giant suitcase full of donated books and a jam-packed solar backpack (more books). He gave me an inquisitive smile before we kissed cheeks and assessed the precarious situation. Moments later, he'd managed to squeeze the bulging red suitcase between his bony legs, and I was done shoving my mass of curls into a peacock-blue Hitler-style helmet. After swallowing any reserves I'd built up on the hectic five-hour ferry ride from Bali, I cracked my back, jumped into position and grabbed hold of his waist. He threw me a backward grin and stomped out his cigarette. We were off.

The hot gravel spitting up at me as Mr.

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Ulan plowed through a patch of road construction almost put an eye out, but we were making good time. We'd just hit the outskirts of Mataram, the capital of Lombok, when we were pulled over for him driving without a helmet. A hasty phone call was made to Mr. Am, the project coordinator of Lombok Live-In, since his uncle was the chief of police. Problem solved. A half a mile later, we got a flat tire. No worries; we just tracked down a used tire and exchanged the two. I was used to winging it, but when we were pulled over again a few blocks later for a busted headlight, I started to think the city was cursed. Mr. Am came to our rescue again and instructed us to meet him at the police station so he could sort out the injustice. Clearly, you needed to have your bike, your helmet and your story in order before you got behind the wheel. I learned firsthand that the local police force thrived on pulling unsuspecting people over and interrogating them with an ear-splitting fury. That sort of frenzied quizzing led to nothing but mass confusion for all parties, but I was digging our situation. I'd been on Lombok for less than a day and I was already in jail. Well, I was on a bench just outside the jail waiting on a resolution for a broken headlight, but I might as well have been behind bars, as close as I was to the chaos. I felt honored to see a third-world government in action. Any poor sod caught breaching the law within eyeshot of the police shack was immediately ambushed by a spitfire young gun—one who'd been expertly positioned to witness the potential obstruction of justice. A restless officer would catch a whiff of an expired tag or a hurried breeze through a red light and instantly hurtle himself onto the tail end of a smoking bike while miraculously gunning the foot crank at the same time. I just watched it all unfold while giving the friendly gents of the Mataram police force an earful. When I informed them that a lone parking ticket in Chicago cost \$50 USD (their monthly wage), they recoiled in horror and offered me a bottle of cold water.

Once we rocketed out of the bustle of Mataram, the long haul to Sembalun zigzagged through ragged towns and mountain-scapes reminiscent of scenes from *The Land of the Lost*. Bottomless pockets of poverty were visible in every doorway. But still, I'd catch glimpses of naked children with beaming smiles hidden by their mothers' skirts. I'd never seen teeth so twinkling, and they were usually coupled with a giant wave and a bellowing "Hello!" Cruising and viewing

the scene from the back of a moped was eye opening in a thousand ways—I could almost reach out and touch the want, the need. But it was a feeling like none I'd encountered in all my worldwide travels. The villagers' liquid eyes didn't suck me into a guilty oblivion filled with non-hope and abyssal sorrow; instead, the warmth in their glances reeled my heart to a new level—one that I could literally taste in my mouth.

As we peaked the mountain pass just outside of Sembalun, the light hum of antiquated motorbikes filled the air, along with the oppressive heat. My pack draped itself like a sweaty corpse on my back, and an hour later, when I finally got off of the motorbike in Mr. Ulan's front yard/organic garden/cow barn/chill-out spot, I felt like I'd just arrived home from a long, arduous trip to the edge of the earth. Only in this square block of cocoa-colored dirt there were dozens of curious faces observing me. It was time to teach.

To put it in movie terms, my days began with a slow fade-in. It went from me peacefully enjoying a breakfast of homemade banana pancakes to balls-out

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chaos at the various grade schools dotting the village. The kids would practically levitate when they saw me approaching their classroom, and I bounced their energy right back at them. Turns out my moxie and their enthusiasm were a match made in heaven. I'd spend the first part of class rehashing the progress we'd made the day before, with simple introductions up first. Sometimes we'd knock out a little art, but the big hit was when I'd choose two students to come up front and role-play. I'd clap my hands and yell "Chop chop!" while the kids put on a terrific show. They'd act like they were petrified to perform, but by the time they made it to the chalkboard, it was all smiles and extreme tactics. Who's going to pull through this intro



victorious? Getting through “My name is...” and “How are you?” was always easy, but once we hit “How old are you?” territory, things took an agonizing spin. Whip smart as the kids were, let’s just say pronunciation wasn’t their strong suit.

I’d say, “How old are you?”

They’d say, “I’m twel-lub.”

I’d say, “No, it’s twel-ve.”

They’d say, “I’m twel-lub.”

I’d say, “No, twel-ve. Twel-vuh. Vuh, vuh, vuh.”

They’d nod and say, “I’m twel-lub. Lub, lub, lub.”

And so it would go for hours. Progress was slow, but there were times when a hopeful face would blast out the word twelve as if he’d been saying it in English his whole life. The entire class would erupt in applause, backslaps and high-fives because they knew how tough it was. Thur-teen was the age to be.

Popping in on my classes throughout the day was Royal, the local charmer on Misty duty. He was a farmer by family association as well as a guide for Rinjani Explorer, the trekking company that founded Lombok Live-In. It just so happened that I was sleeping in his bedroom, since his non-smoking family’s traditional compound was where my home stay was located. We quickly became partners in crime, and when I wasn’t teaching a 7 a.m. class of second-graders how to brush their teeth and use soap for the first time, I could be found on the back of his motorbike. Prowling around the village, I became a walking, talking teaching machine. Everywhere we stopped provided a chance for an impromptu drill in English 101, usually with a giggling crowd surrounding us. I’d toss in some basic Spanish for good measure, and those who could easily became proficient in a flurry of *holas*, *bonitas*, *chicas*, *locos* and *amigos*.

On particularly grueling days, Royal and I would head over to Mayung Putih, a secluded waterfall at the base of Rinjani. Getting there was a reckless, haul-ass ride composed of dreadlocking winds and slam-on-the-brakes beauty. As we made our way through the hills, wild monkeys frozen in grooming mode called to us from swaying treetops. A blissful silence greeted us on the narrow path to the waterfall. After galloping down an almost vertical set of stone stairs, we’d bum rush the deserted pool and spend hours caking our bodies in squishy gray sulfur. Once I’d had my fill of diving under the crashing foam from the crater-fed waterfall, I’d glance at my watch and inquire



about what time we were leaving. Stunned, he’d say, “Slowly, slowly.” I’d grin slyly, and we’d flop back into the ice-cold water until we were deaf from the thundering roar.

Though it took me a few frenzied days to find my teaching groove, I acclimated to life in a third-world country with great ease. Each morning, I’d wake just before dawn, yawning lazily while mentally preparing myself for the day’s events. With each minuscule creak of my wrist or pillow-hugging backstretch, I detected the true colors of my soul escaping. They were sunny yellow and ruby red, and the closer it got to sunrise, the more illuminated they became. When I finally wrapped my weary mind around where I was and what I’d experienced the day before, I’d go from sheer and utter exhaustion to feeling as if I were at the top-notch peak of my very being—all within a few rapid-fire seconds. I began to feel like a giant, I-love-everyone rainbow.

To the satisfaction of my adopted family, I developed a penchant for guzzling sugary hot tea and chitchatting. Once I mastered the local art of flinging my body on any random front porch, concrete stoop or spit of grass, I came to understand that these people led a very poor but very comfortable existence. Splayed out, visiting with neighbors, and casually making one giant circle of the day became second nature, and I couldn’t imagine going back to the hassle of a city after the camaraderie of village life. Toward the middle of my stay, I started giving things away. A shirt here, a watch there. I had no sense of my own reality, and I was having trouble remembering my



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stateside life. I liked drawing a blank when I thought of my old job.

Halfway through my stay, a group of us were at the local soccer field awaiting the arrival of the one boy in the village who owned a soccer ball. Everyone was dressed and ready to play in their mismatching soccer uniforms, but the game couldn't get going until he showed up with the ball. While everyone smoked and made small talk, I imagined what it would be like to trek Rinjani (it was closed for the rainy season) and entertained the kids with penny lollipops and word games. When told that the ball boy was going to be a no-show, I jogged back to Royal's house and grabbed a kid-sized plastic bat and a few plastic balls that I'd forgotten I'd brought. As I buzzed around the field creating a makeshift baseball diamond out of rocks, a group of guys formed around home base with rapt faces. Everyone was alert as I sorted out teams and got down to explaining my ghetto version of baseball. Basically, you hit the ball and run like hell toward first base. Do not stop unless you get tagged with the ball. My brief instructions were taken with a grain of salt, and in no time we had a raging ball-game going. The full abandon of my flip-flops gave me a gazelle-like running prowess, which delighted my competitive spirit. I seemed to nail every fastball and make it on base each time I was up to bat, but the other few players who actually made contact with the ball would only touch down on first base before laughing and walking around aimlessly. They were quick to forget everything I'd depicted as teamwork, and we soon grew drowsy in the midday heat. At least with soccer, you've got the wind continually on your back. Baseball was too much standing around for them, but they appreciated learning a new sport.

Exactly how much my teaching skills were appreciated hit me one evening during my mostly-adults night class. I had the students coughing and sneezing so they could talk about being sick, when the village power went out. The room was promptly awash in candlelight, and the intimacy provided the perfect backdrop for everyone to practice their acting chops. Everyone was reciting their lines with such gusto, I practically throbbed with joy. We'd moved on to the A-B-C song when I heard my own voice being played back over a cell phone speaker. One of the enterprising men in class had recorded the group singing the ABCs so he could play it back after I left. He simply didn't want to forget his letters. I almost cried.

Once the men in the class became familiar with me, they started peppering me with an accumulated list of life's most perplexing riddles. They came to think I was the conduit to every question they'd ever had about the English language. They'd ask things like, "What is the name for this symbol, Miss Misty?" When I explained to the baffled class that the symbol was called a "dash," the look of gratitude that washed over their faces was startling. I've pulled off multimillion-dollar television shows with nary a "Thank you," so to get a look of such joy off a damn dash was astonishing. Hell, I'd never even gone to college, and here I was teaching these villagers the proper way to pronounce words. They were keen on learning the basics: how to talk about farming with pesticides, what to call the produce they sell at the Sunday market, how to tell a tourist what their occupations were. I suppressed a chuckle when I noticed that most of them had taken on the exact lilt and melody of my singsong voice.

On my final evening teaching night class, I told them they could learn anything they wanted, and, of course, it all went back to farming. I narrowed my eyes and said, "How about we play a winking game?" Bedlam broke out. As I scooted around the room on the floor, each of the once-bashful students took their respective turns giving me their sexiest wink. After coming face to face with each of them in the closest proximity they'd ever been with a foreigner, I chose the top three winkers. The sweating-bullets finalists had to stand in front of the class (oh, the horror) and wink for the entire room to judge. The winner got a prize chosen beforehand by a few of the class flirts: a coveted kiss on the cheek from me. In the end, I ended up giving them all pecks on the cheek, and on my way out the door I flipped them the double-whammy—a close-contact demonstration of how to hug properly. As we were cycling home under ultra-bright stars, Royal told me he'd never seen a volunteer who was loved so much. Of course, there had only been five in the short history of Lombok Live-In, but still, I felt my heart flutter.

In that instant, I'd found what I was looking for, and it was something I'd never encountered in any paid working situation—it was a fundamental appreciation for life. Solo voluntourism is the essence of global understanding, and my time spent in that dusty mountain oasis forever changed the way I wanted to travel. I know that if I'd been with a group of volunteers, I'd never have experienced



To learn more about the Lombok Live-In program, visit www.volunteerabroad.com.

Other Voluntourism sites:

Belize:
Maya Mountain Research Farm
www.mmrbfz.org

Thailand:
Panya Project
www.panyaproject.org

Mexico:
Casa de la Imagination
www.yelapa.org

Costa Rica:
Rainsong Wildlife Sanctuary
www.rainsongsanctuary.com

Guatemala:
Long Way Home
www.longwayhomeinc.org

Honduras:
Cofradia School
www.cofradiaschool.com

Ghana:
African Volunteers
africanvolunteers@gmail.com

Ambassadors for Children
www.ambassadorsforchildren.org

Transitions Abroad
www.transitionsabroad.com

VolunTourism
www.voluntourism.org

all of the joyous moments that hit me out of nowhere as I ambled through the village every day. They were slivers in time created just for me. I left Sembalun the next morning with an empty backpack, convinced that paradise wasn't a particular place in the world but instead a series of events like the ones I'd just had. Life felt bigger, deeper and wider. ☺

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