

Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines

Just finished touring Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines which seems a logical breakpoint for a trip report before we get to China and the mainland. Regarding Indonesia, we never before had a real appreciation for how big the country actually is in terms of being an archipelago (over 13,400 islands with almost 6,000 occupied) and population (over 260 million ranking fourth in the world.) Indonesia stretches some 3,100 miles east to west and just over 1,000 miles north to south. Nearly half the population lives on the island of Java which has the second densest population per square mile in the world (next to Singapore). Motor bikes and cycles outnumber automobiles by far. Brunei, on the other hand, is a tiny sovereign state (the size of Rhode Island) on the Indonesian island of Borneo with a population of about 420,000. It is an extraordinarily rich country based on extensive oil and natural gas reserves. Malaysia is unique in that it is separated by the South China Sea into two regions; Peninsular Malaysia on the mainland adjacent to Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia and East Malaysia which is adjacent to Brunei and Indonesia. The population is over 30 million. It is a vibrant, growing country with an envious economy based on natural resources and a growing tourist trade. It has a very advanced healthcare system managed by the government. Lastly, the Philippines is comprised of over 7,600 islands and has a population of just over 100 million (ranking twelfth in the world.) The United States has a long history with the Philippines and large numbers of the population have immigrated to America. They make up a large percentage of the staff on the Viking Sun.

General

Sailing has been remarkably calm with light seas throughout. We have had tropical showers at times which are normal for this time of year for Equatorial countries. The showers have not lasted long and twice we were given plastic raincoats on excursions "just in case." We needed them only once in Bali but actually just used a lightweight, collapsing umbrella. The temperature is simply HOT. While it stays generally between 85-90 degrees, the killer has been the humidity which often equals or exceeds the actual temperature. We try and stay as hydrated as possible and the ship always provides chilled bottle water when we go ashore. However, we have a significant number of fellow passengers that have mobility issues caused by age or weight challenges and this has taken its toll. A number of passengers have been evacuated from excursions for heat exhaustion or falls. A cruise of this duration requires a certain level of physical fitness and too many passengers arrived unprepared.

Lorraine and I have really tried to stay to a good routine of exercise and sleep (includes afternoon nap) because of the sensational food and the evening live entertainment. We try not to miss anything and recognize that a fall will really impact the trip. I am consistently running 2.5 miles on sea days and getting better at increasing my pace. This way I get to "earn" the unbelievably good gelato served at lunch and dinner. Lastly, we have gravitated toward other

likeminded couples in terms of meals and excursions and this has helped reinforce good habits. Now if I can figure out how to keep Lorraine away from all the “bargains” we keep seeing in the market places. In her defense she has good taste and the prices are very, very good on clothing and jewelry.

We keep mentioning food because it warrants the special attention. The head chefs are amazing and keep bringing onboard fresh fruits, fish and vegetables which are sometimes unfamiliar but all very good. We had a special Indonesian Feast which was spectacular. All of the passengers and staff dressed up in colorful and intricately designed clothing from Indonesia and we had a great time. As an interesting note the various restaurants have lately done a much better job on portion control. Early in the trip the portions were simply too big for the appetites of “senior citizens.” Of course some of the largest passengers just ate more but the rest of us struggled a bit to “just say no.” Now, the portions are more appropriate and one can always ask for a larger portion or seconds. The World Café remains a popular eating venue precisely because it is buffet style and one can self-regulate intake. They have a cold seafood bar every night where they serve king crab, seafood salad, langoustines, shrimp and excellent and varied sushi. This is always a good low-calorie alternative to Duck a la Orange or Chateaubriand. Nevertheless, the specialty sorbet changes every day and we feel obligated to not offend the chef by not trying a scoop ... or two. You can see why our yoga and running programs are so important.

Entertainment continues to amaze in terms of variety and professionalism. A new set of entertainers joined us in Darwin and remained with us through the Philippines. First up was George Kamikawa, a finalist on Australia’s Got Talent, who sang, played the acoustic guitar and version of an Hawaiian guitar (on his lap), played a harmonica, and multiple drum pedals with his feet ... almost all at the same time. He did everything from country and western to modern rock. Next up was Mel Mellers, a comedian and magician, who we did not see but seemed to please his audience according to passenger reports. Our first foursome (two men and two women) performed two shows as an ABBA Tribute Band. Called BABBA, they are the top ABBA tribute band in Australia and were very, very good. Strong vocals and excellent piano and electric guitar. They played all of the classic ABBA tunes to packed audiences. People were dancing in the aisles of the theater. Our entertainers in Bali, Indonesia, were a large group of musicians and traditional female dancers all in authentic dress. Very stylistic dancing designed to tell an historical tale based in culture and religion. The musicians played instruments that look like xylophones and where the keys are struck by a small hammer with only the right hand. The left hand is used to mute the keys from note to note. Sounds like bells. Our next night solo performer was Mig Ayesa, a singer born in the Philippines but raised in Australia. He starred on Broadway in the musical Rock of Ages and on the London stage in Rent and Thriller Live. He has performed during a Royal Variety Performance for Queen Elizabeth. Mig was simply enervating with songs from Queen, Inxs, AC/DC, as well as show tunes. He performed two shows before returning to the US for a New York performance. Just before arriving in Brunei, we attended a show by Naomi Edemarian, a classically trained pianist born in Canada but grew up in Ethiopia.

She had scholarships to study at Cambridge University, McGill University, and the Banff International Center for the Arts. Her range of selections was impressive and she played beautifully. Our last imported performer was a comedian named Paul Adams. British by birth but international in terms of his career, he proved to be very adept at delivery (mostly new) jokes and kidding the audience. When the audience booed a reference to the British Parliament, he adroitly commented that we had nothing to brag about. The oblique reference to President Trump drew a surprising number of laughs. We had one more show before the Philippines and that was presented by our own Cruise Director, Heather Clancy. A classically trained mezzo-soprano, she did both selections from opera as well as show tunes. She casually mentioned performing with Marvin Hamlisch, the composer and piano marvel, and later sang a difficult Whitney Houston song. It was perfect.

We also picked up three new lecturers for our trip and they include: Richard Turnbull, PhD from the Art History Department at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York City; Sir Chris Bonington, one of the foremost mountaineers of all time to include the first British ascent of the north face of the Eiger in Switzerland and has led numerous filmed expeditions to the Himalayas, and Alistair Miller, an award winning British photographer who has worked for the *The Times* and *Sunday Times*. Dr. Turnbull has presented lectures on the art and culture of each of the stops in the Far East. Sir Bonington has given three lectures detailing his career as first a climber, then photo journalist, and finally expedition leader. Extraordinary presentations documented with historical film clips. Mr. Miller presented a series of photo workshops which were oversubscribed. Feedback is that they are terrific.

Excursions

1. **Komodo (Indonesia).** Komodo Island is part of the Lesser Sunda chain of islands and forms part of Komodo National Park. While there are 2,000 human inhabitants on the island, the most famous -- and protected -- animals are the giant Komodo dragons or lizards. These prehistoric looking animals are the largest lizards on earth and range from 8-10' in length and 125-150 lbs. They are carnivorous and feed on island deer and wild boar as well as small Komodo lizards. Baby Komodo dragons spend their first 2-3 years in trees hiding from predators and subsisting on insects and smaller lizard species. On our tour we saw two young dragons (3-4' long) and six large dragons (7-8' feet long.) They are very fast when chasing prey and have an unusually keen sense of smell. Anyone with an open cut or pregnant is not allowed to visit the park. Our issue became heat exhaustion for several individuals who simply could not do the long walk around the park. We saw one couple fall and had to be helped up but another woman fell and hit her head and was evacuated back to the Viking Sun hospital. The optional tour was to a pink sand beach (one of seven in the world) for swimming and snorkeling. The color comes from the breakdown of pink coral offshore. This was an easy excursion compared to the rigors of the Komodo Dragon Park.

2. **Bali (Indonesia).** The very name of this island conjures up visions of swaying palm trees and serene vistas. The reality, at least for us on this visit and excursion, was an island of over 4.4 million people all trying to survive economically. Eighty percent of the economy is, in fact, based on tourism and this was in evidence as the Viking Sun pulled into the harbor of Benoa. A larger ship, The Renaissance of the Seas (with 2,600 passengers), was moored outside the harbor and running tender operations. We were able to actually dock which saved travel time. The harbor itself is bordered by resorts and marinas and not less than ten boats were pulling parasailers at the same time. Meanwhile, other boats were pulling “tubers” and jet skis were all over the place. There were sandbars, half sunken boats, etc. so we figured someone would be killed as some point. In town on our included tour we decided that the “first to die” would be the 1.2 million motorcycle and scooter drivers clogging the roads. Families of four would be on one motorcycle. Yes, there are cars and buses too and many of the secondary roads are exactly one and one-half lanes wide! We took a tour to the Ubud Rice Terraces and the Ubud Museum followed by shopping.



However, traffic was so bad that we only had 30 minutes at the rice terraces before leaving for the museum which turned out to be more of an art gallery. The guide wanted us “to have maximum shopping time” which is a recurring theme on every excursion in Indonesia and, we expect, in the Far East. We rebelled a bit, spent more

time at the museum and wandered through the outdoor markets and shops at our leisure. Found some lovely, really inexpensive silver jewelry but had to hustle back to the bus for the long trip back to the ship. Too be fair, there were five other excursions that focused on temples, Balinese Arts and Crafts, and three evening diners with shows. Feedback from other passengers was generally positive but all agreed that the traffic and allotment of time “to buy things” was excessive. Noteworthy was the fact that the population is 85% Hindu and they take their religion seriously. Every house has its own personal temple for venerating past generations and containing cremated remains. If you walk in a town, every time you see an opening there is a courtyard and cultural and religious artifacts.

3. **Semarang, Java (Indonesia).** The population of Java is approximately 125 million or half the total population of Indonesia. Semarang is an active port serving large import and export markets as well as the tourist trade. The city is about 1.5 million and again, a disproportionate number of motorcycles and scooters always on the go. Interestingly, everyone wears helmets but not sure if that is the law or just self-preservation. We took the Discover Semarang tour which included a visit to the largest protestant church in the city as well as a visit to the Sam Koon Pong Temple in Chinatown. The latter was more of a compound of several Chinese temples. Classic architecture and a very large statue of Admiral Zheng He who led a fleet of 317 ships in 1405 AD looking for spices and new trade routes dominate the temple grounds. Great pictures! Viking had arranged for refreshments at the temple complex which consisted of Java coffee (very good but very sweet) as well as Indonesian pastries. What looked like a cookie turned out to be something like a large round jelly bean but softer ... hard to describe. Another snack was a pastry like a fruit tart ... very good. We left the temple and proceeded to the center of town for, you guessed it, 90 minutes of shopping. Once again, we hustled the guide (who was very good) to take us to the large mosque in the area before going to the mall. Our guide was Muslim and provided great insight into the blending of religions and cultures in Java. Interestingly, there was an imam teaching three young women in the entrance way to the mosque and our guide basically said the imam was a fake as the mosque was his own and he knew all the real imams. He also offered that Indonesians are addicted to sweets and smoking (over 75% of the adult population) and that this was the leading cause of illness (diabetes and lung cancer). Finally, he talked about the 17% unemployment rate but that almost all of the “unemployed” work in small kiosks selling cigarettes, soda and tourist souvenirs. The Indonesian government supports family planning and provides medical and educational benefits for up to two children (used to be three before the population started to explode). Medical care is subsidized by the government but there is a cost share. We completed the tour with a trip to the mall which was very modern and three stories high. We actually bought a shirt for me and a shift for Lorraine that are very well made, of an intricate design, and very inexpensive. We wore these purchases at Indonesia Night.

4. **Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei).** This city is the capital of the country and has a population of approximately 100,000 while adding in the surrounding districts brings the total to about 280,000 or over half of the country's total population. It is a monarchy ruled by the Sultan of Brunei whose vast wealth is based on extensive oil and gas reserves. There are a number of palaces and mosques with extensive carvings and gilded in gold. The Istana Nurul Iman palace is the largest in the world boasting 1,788 rooms, 257 bathrooms, and a 110-car garage! There is very low unemployment with over 50% of the population employed by the government. There is no income tax and mortgages for government-sponsored housing (based on income levels) has no interest rate. Public education and medical support is free to include treatments for cancer in Hong Kong or Singapore paid by the government. There are a large number of guest workers but actually becoming a Brunei citizen is strictly controlled. Average houses are 1,500-2,000 square feet and over 1.2 million cars are registered for the population of 420,000. Two and three-car families are typical with subsidized gas prices at 40 cents per liter or five times less than surrounding countries. There were very, very few motorcycles or motor scooters. Brunei is split by Malaysia so the Sultan is building a 3.2 billion dollar bridge to bridge the gap between the two parts of the country. We took the Water Villages and Technology Museum included tour. The water villages are among the largest in the world with over 42,000 inhabitants living in houses on stilts or wooden pilings but most are occupied by retired Brunei workers. The houses we visited were actually very large inside but decay is widespread and the younger family members are leaving the water villages for the interior subsidized apartments and individual houses. We also visited the Technology Museum which is a bit of a misnomer as it houses the technology of the area as of 1988 when it was constructed. However, it had a number of displays of the metal refining, fishing, woodworking, etc. that characterized the early 20th Century. The people were very friendly, spoke excellent English and took US dollars as easily as Bruneian dollars. Friends on ship who toured the palaces and mosques were similarly impressed.
5. **Kota Kinabalu (East Malaysia).** Dominated by and named after the highest mountain in the area, the city is the capital of the state of Sabah. Having been totally destroyed during World War II, the city is partially built on reclaimed land near the sea and thus, the interior of the state has been preserved more to reflect the indigenous populations. The city's population is over 450,000 (or larger than the entire country of Brunei with which it shares a border) and has many high-rise commercial and residential buildings. We visited a 13 –story department store composed entirely of small individual shops. Chinese compose the largest percentage of the population followed by smaller Malaysian sub-groups. One third of the population is non-Malaysian. While there were more motorcycles in evidence, cars again predominated the busy streets. We took the Mari Mari Cultural Village included tour and loved it!



After a one hour drive to the village, we received an orientation on the five specific cultural groups that lived in the surrounding area and then entered the “village” walking down a narrowing path over water and through what I would classify as a real jungle. It was very warm and humid but one really had the feel for being taken back in time to how villagers actually lived. We were greeted by a chief resplendent in full tribal regalia wearing a crown of peacock feathers. Warriors escorted us we toured a number of homes faithfully reproducing actual buildings found in the area. These included “long houses” for communal living as well as individual houses and buildings constructed for cooking, weaving fabric, making bowls and baskets, fishing, etc. Each place we visited provided samples of food and drink and the “how” people lived. It involved a lot of climbing in and out of tight spaces and a number of narrow ladders but we made it and had a great time. The village tour ended with a performance of native dances and songs as well as a terrific exhibition of using blow guns to hit targets demonstrating hunting skills. Note that the last incidence of head-hunting in the area was in the mid-1950s so this was a real experience as they explained why the heads were kept as prizes and how they had to guard their women from rival tribes and inebriated members of their own people.

6. **Manila (the Philippines).** Founded by the Spanish in 1571, the city is a reflection of its Spanish, Chinese, American and Malay history. Manila is the most densely populated city proper in the world at over 1.8 million with the larger metropolitan area of over 12.8 million. Roman Catholics make up over 83.5% of the population and religion plays a large role in daily life. We chose to take an included tour called the Best of Manila to get a feel for the city. First stop was at San Agustin church which the oldest stone church in the city and the only one to survive the massive bombing of Manila in the Second World War. As it was Sunday a mass was being held in the church so we could not go very far inside but it was beautiful from what we could see. We walked across the street from the church to Casa Manila which is a museum and converted from a large home with its original furnishings and rooms. Belonging to a wealthy merchant, it reflected the preference for Chinese furniture but the outside is pure Spanish architecture. We then took a bus ride thru the city to Fort Santiago which had been a stronghold for the Spanish and guarded the harbor for over 300 years. The fort was occupied by the Japanese during the war and used as a prison. The details of the incarceration of Filipino and American soldiers is well documented in displays around the fort.



7. Sobering but real history and venerated by the Philippine people. Other excursions went to the island of Corregidor which housed GEN MacArthur's headquarters, visited Taal Volcano Island (active), and Pagsanjan Falls (white water rafting in a canoe.) The people were very friendly and not really pushy in terms of selling things. The biggest issues in Manila are waste management (streets were often clogged with refuse and Manila Bay is littered with floating trash) and drugs. The drug issue drives crime rates and the government's draconian measures to deal with the problem have produced results but raised international concerns.

This part of the trip has certainly been eye-opening in terms of sheer geography, population size and the impact of religion and culture. Hindu, Muslim, Catholic influences can be either stark or nuanced but everyone seems to get along. Certainly, the populations are continuing to expand, often by immigration which is stressing all the governments in the region. There are literally thousands of islands belonging to or contested by different countries. Once again, Chinese banking interests are very obvious in this part of the world.