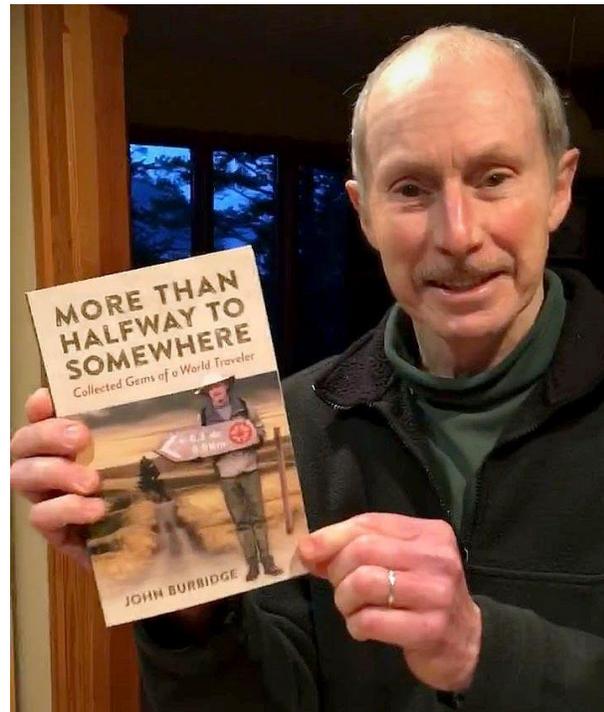


MORE THAN HALFWAY TO SOMEWHERE ZOOMS AGAIN

Former ICA staffer, John Burbidge, has received some great reviews for his latest book, *MORE THAN HALFWAY TO SOMEWHERE: Collected gems of a world traveler.*

Terry Larder, in the online magazine *Out in Perth*, commented, “Burbidge not only has the gift of recollection, but the literary skills to put the reader in touch with the many characters he encountered, bringing them to life in a way that enhances the narrative and makes this book unputdownable”.

One of his stories, *King of the Road*, about an unforgettable hitchhike in Zambia and Zimbabwe, received an honourable mention in this year’s Solas Awards for Best Travel Writing.



Sponsored by the ICA Social Research Center’s *Global Calendar of Events*, ICA -USA board member Nancy Trask partnered with John in a recent Zoom session that used the book to discuss how our exposure to other cultures has shaped our lives. Said ICA Program Director, Karen Snyder, “It was a great example of having a conversation about a book and engaging the group in their life experience in relation to the group topic.”

Positive feedback from participants has led organizers to arrange a second session on July 22nd for those in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Participants are urged to read the book beforehand. For details how to obtain a copy, either print or ebook, visit www.wordswallah.com.

To give you a feel for the book, here are excerpts from three chapters – from Africa, Asia and Central America. We hope these will entice you to read the whole book and join in this exciting and important dialogue.

To register for the session, go to...

<https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZAAtfu2tqDwvHdyLDBn9C2Ey2VR27z5qJ0-y>



John Burbidge

Introduction

In September 2005 I made a trip to Costa Rica where my friend Sandy lived. I wanted to experience the country’s famous rain forests so chose a lodge near the Panama border to spend a few days. When the website described this time of year as “the green season”, it didn’t occur to me that this was a euphemism for “hurricane-affected rainy season”. As a result, all the advertised activities I hoped to enjoy never happened, but the trip turned into one of the most memorable I’ve experienced. Here are two reasons why.

To compensate for missing the national park, Andrés suggested an alternative. Adjacent to Bahía Paraíso was a 500-hectare biological reserve attached to another lodge. Andrés assured me it contained the same biodiversity as the famous Corcovado National Park and said that the owners had given permission to take guided tours through the reserve. Verena, one of two young Austrian guests, wanted to come too, so we formed a threesome. Foursome actually, because Rocco, the lodge’s resident mutt, decided to join us. Freddy said Rocco always followed the tourists but never the staff. No doubt he relished the attention visitors paid him; perhaps in return he saw it as his duty to protect them from danger.

We took off up the hill behind the lodge to a lookout with a 180-degree view of Drake Bay. From the lookout we trekked along the escarpment before coming to the trailhead into the forest. Every now and again Freddy would stop, point, and with unrestrained glee proclaim, "See!" On closer inspection and usually with the help of binoculars we would notice a red-capped manikin, a rufous-tailed jacama or spider monkeys. The prize was a brownish-gray blur high up in a tree that turned out to be a sloth, as languid as its name implies. I couldn't resist sharing this gem with Freddy, who dutifully added 'slothful' to his collection of rare and prized English words.

A short way into the walk Freddy pointed to fresh footprints.

"Deer," he said authoritatively.

But about a kilometer further on he stopped again, got down on his haunches, and more thoroughly examined the prints. A slight frown came over his face.

"Perhaps it is wild pig, peccary."

I had read that peccaries could be the most dangerous animals in the rain forest, especially if surprised or threatened. They are known to take on jaguars and pumas and emerge victorious. I looked at Verena, who was looking at Freddy. Just as I was about to open my mouth she beat me to it.

"What should we do if we meet the pig?"

Bang on, I thought.

"Climb a tree, quickly," replied Freddy.

I looked around for likely trees. All I could see were straight up and down and as slippery as a greased pole. Sensing our anxiety, Freddy jumped into the breach.

"Don't worry," he said. "You rarely see peccaries here. I've never come across one."

With these reassuring words we kept walking deeper into the forest, but more cautiously. Freddy spent less time looking up into trees and more time down at the ground. After a few hundred meters we came across a mound of freshly upturned earth.

"Termite nest," said Freddy.

What he didn't say was patently clear to all of us. That pig was not far off. At that moment I noticed that Rocco was no longer with us. He would disappear from time to time but return shortly after. Suddenly I felt vulnerable. Trust Freddy, I kept reminding myself. He knows this place, he knows these creatures. We kept walking but closer together than before. Then amid the gentle pitter-patter of rain splashing on leaves and the squelch of our boots in the mud, a sharp snapping sound rang out. Freddy froze. Verena and I exchanged nervous glances.

"Run!" yelled Freddy.

Just then Rocco's bark echoed through the forest. My adrenalin was pumping full bore. We found a few trees that angled slightly but getting a firm grip on their slimy trunks was near impossible. Freddy helped Verena hoist herself up a tree on one side of the trail before finding one for himself a few meters away. I seized on one opposite Verena but was only a meter or so off the ground, so I looked for other options. An old-growth tree with hanging vines nearby looked promising. Would I have time to change trees before the pig appeared? Could I make it up to a higher foothold? And what about Andrés' warning to never put your hands on trees and plants in the rain forest? Casting caution aside, I jumped to the ground, raced to the other tree, and hauled myself up using the vines like a rope.

As I did Verena called out, "I don't know how much longer I can hold on."

"Why don't you join me?" I suggested, since there seemed to be enough space below me to get her safely off the ground.

She fled her tree and clawed her way up mine. I tried to help but her tight jeans made it difficult to stretch her legs and get a grip on the trunk. I barely had the strength to hold on to the vines with one hand and pull her up with the other. We held our breath, wondering what the pig was up to. Then the silence was shattered by Rocco's bark. Had he cornered the pig? Was the pig about to attack him? What if Rocco should be injured or die? For a moment I was more concerned about his fate than ours; the two seemed so intertwined.

After about ten minutes Freddy decided to scope out the situation and returned shortly afterwards, beckoning us down. Since our only option was to go back the way we'd come, this meant walking through the area where we had first heard the pig. Freddy informed us that the snapping sound we heard was the noise peccaries make when ready to attack. I was not sure I wanted to know this at that moment. We retraced our steps, Freddy in front, Verena in the middle, and I in the rear. About every 30 seconds I turned around to check we were not being followed by an angry pig.

Just as we were beginning to relax our guard there was a shuffle in the bushes. We froze. I looked around for suitable trees to climb but there were none. Then Rocco bounded out of the bushes and greeted us waving his tail. You could hear a collective sigh of relief. A little further on we stumbled upon a cross made of sapling branches tied together with rusted wire. I wondered what it commemorated.

* * *

Once we had downed our food and drinks we packed into a compact Toyota and were on our way. Father drove, mother sat in the front passenger seat, while I hunkered down in the back with grandma. She was like a little bird that occasionally chirped a word or two but mostly remained silent. Apart from helping her adjust her seatbelt or open her purse, I tried not to inflict my low level of conversational Spanish on her.

Having visited Mexico and Guatemala, I knew Latin Americans had a different relationship to driving than those of us from more staid cultures. I'd experienced their grab-the-initiative-and-keep-it-at-all-costs mode of driving, but I wasn't prepared for Andrés' father's wild rampage. He seemed intent on trying to break the world speed record for four-door sedans on two-lane roads under hurricane-affected weather conditions. When he took his first 90-degree corner at 100 kilometers an hour I thought he was just showing off. But when he continued to perform such gymnastic feats I began to doubt our prospects of making it home alive. His favorite tactic was to try to pass a long line of vehicles, including at least one mammoth Del Monte truck, while heading into a blind corner. Rapid acceleration and deceleration seemed to be key.

My immersion into the world of *Tico* driving would not have been quite so unnerving if it hadn't been for the massive landslides caused by recent heavy rains. Entire hillsides had been dislodged and were strewn across the road. We would tear around corners to be confronted by earth-moving equipment trying to remove piles of dirt and trees blocking the road. I prayed we had good brakes. After several close encounters I wondered if Andrés' father might be a little more cautious, but they only egged him on. These were challenges any self-respecting *Tico* driver was meant to overcome.

Such feats called for constant refueling, and not just of the vehicle. Forty minutes after leaving Restaurante Las Vegas we stopped at a roadside café. Andrés' father stormed into the shop and came back laden with snacks and bottled water. Two hours later we pulled into a roadside diner. When I politely passed on the beef stew with bean and eggs combo the others looked at me in amazement. Stomachs dragging on the ground, we returned to the car and the home stretch.

As we came closer to San José I discovered that Andrés' family didn't live in San José but in the ancient capital of Cartago 20 kilometers east. Andrés' father's offer to drive me to the Cartago bus station gave me one more chance to sample his exquisite driving skills. The fact that we were driving through built-up suburbs didn't deter him. Entire blocks flashed past in a blur. Traffic lights and stop signs seemed like unnecessary decor.

Within minutes we were at the bus station. As I was about to thank him for this day-of-a-lifetime he said something about a taxi *collectivo* and trotted over to a group of taxi drivers huddled on the sidewalk. When he returned he tried to explain something to me. My grasp of Spanish took a quantum leap but it seemed I had a choice between waiting for more passengers and a cheaper rate, or going alone and paying more. Given the day's events and my desire to return to the comfort and security of Sandy's home, I chose the latter. With a handshake that would never end, Andrés' father looked me in the eyes and said a hearty *mucho gusto*. All I could muster was a feeble *muchas gracias*.

Excerpted from 'Pura Vida' in *More Than Halfway to Somewhere*

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Peter Romberg

Introduction

In 1986 I attended a meeting of our Africa staff in Lusaka, Zambia. After the meeting I had several days before my flight back to Brussels, so I decided to hitchhike to learn more about the country. Of my three trips, the most rewarding was from Lusaka to Harare, Zimbabwe, thanks to an amazing man who not only drove me there and back, told me endless stories about his life on the road and his involvement in the war of independence, but invited me to stay with him and his family in Harare. Here are two excerpts.

Stories kept tumbling out of his mouth like water from an open tap. But one riveted me more than any other. It happened to John Denby (JD) two nights before in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

“I’d parked me truck outside a hotel by the ocean. I left the window down slightly to get a little breeze into the cab. Sleep better that way. I’d turned in for the night,” he said, motioning with his head to the bunk behind him. “About one in the morning I woke up with a start to find a black face leering over me and a knife at my throat. Demanded all my valuables. Could hardly bargain with him, could I? So I offloaded my watch, alarm clock, camera and wedding ring. At least I kept my throat intact and I still have my truck. I usually have my little dog with me, but I didn’t bring him this trip because he had to go to the vet. Just my damn luck.”

JD's seeming nonchalance as he described this episode floored me. I racked my brains for something comforting to say but everything I thought of seemed so trite.

"Guess I was even luckier than I realized that you showed up this morning," I said. He chuckled and threw me a hint of a smile.

As we neared the top of the escarpment a giant baobab tree caught my eye. I was transported back to northwestern Australia where I'd lived in the mid-1970s. Boabs, as they are known there, are a feature of that ancient landscape, as they are in this part of Africa and Madagascar. This tree looked to be at least 15 meters tall and about 4 meters in diameter. Its bloated, water-carrying trunk gave it a grossly overweight look.

"You know JD, in Australia there's one boab that's so broad and hollow that some say it was used to lock up Aboriginal prisoners."

"You're kidding," he said, rolling his head from side to side in disbelief. "There's no telling what lengths some people will go to, is there?"

At that moment JD braked, slowed down, and pulled the truck over to the side of the road. I thought we were going to take in the view or relieve our bladders.

"Hop out," he said. "There's someone I'd like you to meet."

Meet? Here and now? It didn't seem possible. I got down and walked around to the other side of the truck. Near the edge of the road sat an old black man huddled under a brightly colored blanket, a small metal plate at his feet.

"Hullo you old rascal," said JD.

The man turned his face in JD's direction and waved his hand.

"So it's you again, eh. I thought I recognized the sound of your truck. What mischief have you been up to?"

JD went over to the old man, knelt down beside him, and handed him a brown paper bag. The man took it, thrust his hand inside, and smiled.

"So you remembered what I like. I was getting low on chocolate. Just as well you showed up when you did."

"Yeah, I expected you'd be running out soon, you old bastard. Hey, I've brought someone to meet you. All the way from Australia...no Belgium...well, kind of everywhere. Bit like me."

JD motioned to me to move closer and hold out my hand. It was then I realized the old man was blind. He grasped my hand and gave it a firm shake.

"You like my country?" he asked.

"Yes, very much. It reminds me a lot of parts of my own, especially with all these bottle trees."

“Ah, the bottle trees. You can keep the trees and give me the bottles.”

JD and I both laughed. We carried on our banter for a few more minutes before JD gave the old man a firm pat on the back and bid him farewell.

“Got to be going. The wife’s expecting me home for dinner. Take care, old man.”

During my stay in Harare, I came to know of the suffering John Denby’s family, and his servants’ family also, experienced during the war. It helped to explain why their family included two adopted children, in addition to three of their own. Two days later, JD and I headed back to Lusaka.

As we approached the Chirundu border crossing, JD slowed down the truck, reached into his leather bag, and produced several tins of boot polish.

“Planning to polish your shoes?” I asked.

“Not mine, mate. Customs officials. They have a certain weakness for the stuff, shall we say.”

Whiskey, maybe. Used Levis, perhaps. But boot polish! Of all the things you could bribe officials with I’d never have thought of this.

“Why boot polish?” I asked.

“Simple. Zambia no longer makes it. Luxury item, mate. They can’t afford to import the raw materials to produce it.”

With that masterstroke we avoided the long queue of weary bodies snaking its way out of the door of the customs office, where a two- or three-hour wait was normal. Whether my companion also paid ‘push money’ usually demanded at African border crossings I didn’t care to ask. John Denby was an old pro at this game so I trusted him implicitly.

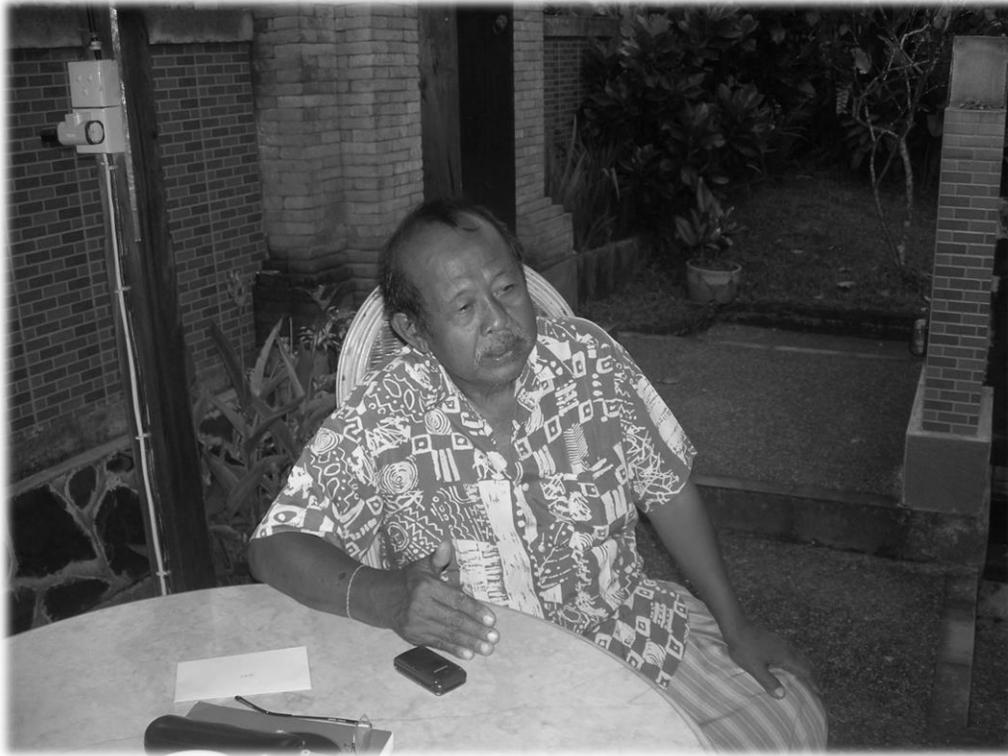
Within 40 minutes we had cleared customs and immigration and were on our way. Sitting high up in the cab of his mighty Scania we quickly lapsed into more story telling. Our time together was coming to a close and we both wanted to make the most of it. Nearing the outskirts of Lusaka he said something that left me speechless.

“Ya know, we need more people who can transcend national and racial barriers. Global citizens I guess you’d call them.”

If anyone embodied that phrase, it was John Denby.

Excerpted from ‘King of the Road’ in *More Than Halfway to Somewhere*

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Bruce Robertson

Introduction

In 2012 my husband and I spent a wonderful month on the Indonesian islands of Bali and Lombok. In each place we were extremely fortunate to be there on the occasion of a major cultural celebration — the Galungan festival in Bali and the Nyali festival in Lombok. The following excerpts offer a glimpse of each and help explain why we left Indonesia deeply affected by the role cultural traditions play in the lives of local people, despite the impact of mass tourism.

Before we left on our trip to Indonesia in 2012 I practiced Bahasa Indonesian every day. Compared to other languages it seemed easy. I memorized lists of items, critical sentences like ‘Where’s the toilet?’ and the odd bit of flattery. But I soon discovered that only three expressions were really important — *tidak apa apa* (no problem), *mungkin* (maybe) and *belum* (not yet). In this country of 270 million people, 300 ethnic groups and more than 700 languages ‘getting along’ is not just a necessity but a way of life. Confrontation is assiduously avoided and anger is frowned upon. Saying no is a no-no. As the German author Horst Henry Geerken noted after 18 years in Indonesia, “the highest virtue is always to remain calm and collected. Impatience and haste are regarded as indecorous.”

Our arrival in Bali coincided with the Galungan festival in which families welcome ancestors back home with feasting and prayers at the family temple. For several days women wove delicate offerings from coconut fronds and men carved long bamboo poles known as *penjors* that lined every street. On the day itself Nyoman, the assistant manager of Bali Breeze, arrived bearing Balinese sarongs for us to wear. He informed us that Ketut, our host, wanted us to dress appropriately for this special occasion. With Nyoman's help we donned our new attire and headed into town, where we received many compliments from Balinese but foreigners looked at us askance.

As we strolled around Ubud we noticed many young men washing their motorcycles. At first we thought this was another Galungan activity but later learned that it was a common practice. Indonesians own more than 40 million motorcycles, about 75% of all vehicles in the country. They drive them with and without helmets, on all sides of the road, and weave in and out of traffic like slalom skiers. In some parts of the world this would make for chaos and accidents. With tooting horns and an ingrained politeness, Indonesian motorcyclists negotiate traffic like they do everything else — in a most accommodating way. Those who own larger vehicles lavish similar care on them. As one driver exclaimed, “My wife says I'm married to my car! But how can I help it? I spend more of my life with it than I do with her!”

You aren't in Bali long before you notice that everything is an art form — the elegant presentation of food on your plate, the exquisite offerings to the gods that appear at your doorstep every morning, the interior walls in family compounds that are built to confuse intruding demons. Art surrounds you, even when you least expect it. Standing at a urinal in an airport toilet I found myself gazing into an aquarium of tropical fish; above the wash basins was an arrangement of fragrant frangipani flowers. At first this penchant for the artistic seemed strange but it soon began to affect us. In Balinese society creativity of any sort is deeply honored. Being a painter, carver, dancer, musician or actor is regarded with high esteem. You may be a taxi driver or schoolteacher by day and a Wali dancer or gamelan player by night. The latter are not peripheral to everyday life, but central to it.

* * *

Throughout our four weeks in Indonesia many things impressed us and called us to question some of our own cultural assumptions. We noticed that wherever we went we never heard a child cry or scream. From birth until about two, children are regarded as gifts of the gods and are not allowed to touch the ground, lest it contaminate them. They are carried by parents or siblings until they are old enough to join other children and are then allowed to roam as they please. There is little concern for their safety, since siblings, older children and the entire community take care of them. Visitors to Indonesia have commented that children seem to mature early, perhaps in part because of these child-rearing practices.

Before leaving Gili Gede island we tried booking accommodation in Kuta, a beach resort on Lombok's southern coast. Every place we phoned was full, which was puzzling since it was low season. Then Herman, our friend-cum-guide, remembered that the annual Nyale festival was taking place in Kuta. We were visiting on the one day of the year when people from all over Lombok descended on the town. Nevertheless, we decided to trust our luck and took a taxi. When we arrived two hours later we were thankful to get the last two rooms in a cheap motel.

Nyale are small, colored sea worms found in tropical waters. When seasonal, marine and lunar conditions converge — usually February or March — they spawn on beaches along Lombok's south coast, especially Seger Beach near Kuta. Eaten raw or grilled with coconut and spices, nyale are considered to be an aphrodisiac. But the festival is much more than a chance to catch a few buckets of libido-enhancing sea worms. It is steeped in myth and traditions close to the heart of Lombok's Sasak people. A beautiful young princess, Mandalika, was being pursued by suitors from rival kingdoms. Finding herself unable to choose among them and fearing her choice would fuel a war she threw herself off a cliff into the sea at Seger Beach. When people searched for her all they found were the writhing nyale, thought to be her remnants of her long hair. Her transformation became a parable about sacrificing for the greater good and another reminder to avoid confrontation.

We didn't know this when we sat down on the beach under a tree to get respite from the fierce midday heat. As the afternoon progressed more people began to appear. Truckloads of young men dressed in brightly colored outfits and carrying instruments were followed by groups of exquisitely quaffed young women. Amid thumping drums and a cheering crowd, the procession headed down the main road. Sitting high on a platform carried by an entourage of young men was a stunning Mandalika dressed in gold cloth.

That evening we chose a simple warung on the beach for dinner. As we ate Herman chatted with the restaurant owner, Made. A soft-spoken, middle-aged man, Made told us that early the next morning people would gather at Seger Beach to catch nyale, but before that there would be a dramatic re-enactment of the Mandalika legend. If we wanted to see this we would need to be there about 3:00 am. Made had planned to go by boat to catch nyale, but when Herman asked if he'd drive us to the beach he willingly agreed.

Just before 3:00 am Made's van pulled up in front of our motel and we joined the flood of cars and motorcycles heading east. When we arrived at the parking lot our jaws dropped. Before us were several thousand motorcycles. Walking through crowded food stalls we glimpsed the Mandalika drama taking place on a giant stage, but decided to make straight for the beach. In the water were masses of people with all kinds of lights — flashlights, headlamps, cell phones, tablets and other devices. We followed Made

with his improvised net and bucket. When he spotted a good-sized worm he'd scoop it up and toss it into the bucket. In the midst of the hubbub, a television crew strode calmly through the water, cameras perched on their shoulders and microphones in hand to capture this magic moment. As the first light of dawn broke over the headland we forgot our tiredness and received a new injection of life. How fortunate we were to have witnessed this spectacle, as we had been in Bali with Galungan. It was as though we had been led to these places at this time. I began to see why many Indonesians believe in a world beyond the rational.

* * *

All too soon it was time to return to Lombok and take a plane to Bali before the long flight home. When the little fishing perahu picked us up from the beach we didn't want to leave. That night in Lombok we had dinner with an acquaintance of Herman's who had arranged our accommodation and an all-day excursion to the north of the island. On the way back we stopped at a site where our host was building bungalows by the beach. With typical Indonesian indirectness, he tried to interest us investing in this development. Spending time in this magnificent place among such accommodating people in such a vibrant culture was most compelling. But living half a world away injected hard reality into that scenario. We thanked him for his kind offer and promised to consider it, as well as recommend it to others, *mungkin* and *belum*.

Excerpted from 'Maybe But Not Yet' in *More Than Halfway to Somewhere*
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