

Encounter on Java

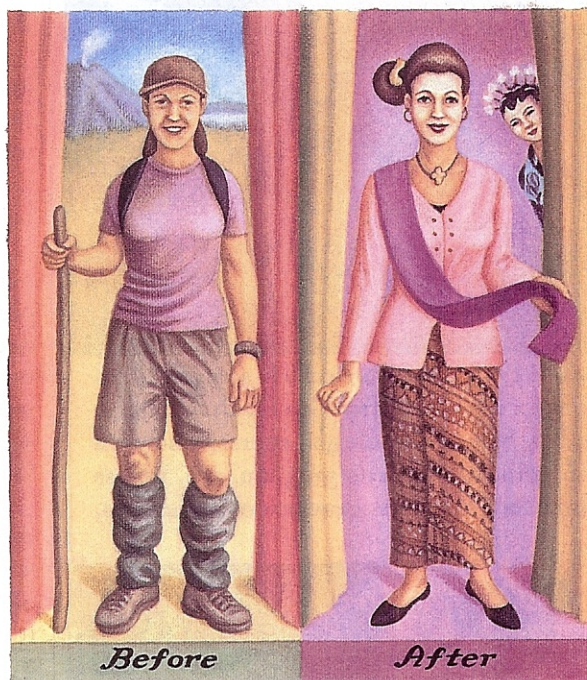
The Accidental Bridesmaid

A Western backpacker gets an island makeover to attend an Indonesian wedding.

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk

I WAS SITTING ON A BED IN AN Indonesian guest house in the city of Solo, with long fake lashes fluttering on my eyelids and my lips glowing as red as poinsettias. Surrounding me were ten women who were attempting to transform me from a casually clad Western traveler into an elegantly dressed Eastern celebrant. No easy task.

At a local museum the day before,



my friend Erik and I had met a cellist named Widodo. His band was to perform at a wedding ceremony the next

day, and he insisted that it would be a "great honor" if we would attend. (It's common for anyone associated with an Indonesian wedding to invite guests to the ceremony, and it is considered a particular privilege to share the culture with foreign guests.) I was delighted with the invitation, but after ten months of backpacking across Asia and the South Pacific, I had one small concern.

"I have nothing to wear," I told Endang, a woman who helped run the guest house where I was staying.

Erik was going Western-style, in khakis and a button-down shirt, but all I had with me was a tattered skirt. Not wanting to offend anyone by dressing inappropriately, I spent several hours hunting for an outfit at batik markets around town but arrived back

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Crossroads

was a buzz of excitement in the air when we arrived, or perhaps I was sensing my own nervousness. Either way, as we stepped into the pavilion, at least 40 sets of eyes turned our way. I suddenly felt more vulnerable, more on display than I had when I'd been standing naked in a roomful of women. I tried to read the looks on the guests' faces, wondering whether they were horrified or pleased by my appearance. Everyone smiled or nodded in approval, which put me a little more at ease.

The bride – wide-eyed and looking nervous as she stood beside the groom on a raised platform – was stunning in her kuning langsat, her green silk blouse, her golden sarong, and her elaborate jasmine headpiece that symbolized her status as queen for the day. Yet the guests seemed to be focusing their gazes and cameras on me. Feeling self-conscious and hoping to deflect the attention back to the bride, I kept my eyes on her. But it didn't work; throughout the ceremony and afterward, I was photographed eating, talking, sitting, standing, and fiddling with my eyelashes, which kept

sticking together. Not only did they hinder my vision, but they also became a distraction, adding to my sense of awkwardness. Finally, convincing myself that they were falling off, I ripped them from my eyelids.

As the event drew to a close, the bride and groom stood on their platform, and official family portraits were taken. Widodo approached Erik and me and said: "The bride and groom wish to have a photo with you. Would

you kindly come inside?"

Erik helped me up the steps, and when the bride saw us approaching she smiled for the first time all night – a young, girlish smile that reflected my own jittery excitement. "*Terima kasih*" ("thank you"), I said to the couple after posing for the photograph, and then I shuffled away.

It was long after midnight by the time we reached the guest house, and Endang and her friends were fast asleep. I crept up to my room, where I spent an hour washing off the makeup, combing out my hair, and trying to transform myself back into someone

Love Rituals

A Javanese wedding can last up to a week and includes a lifetime's worth of rituals and symbolism. There are bathing rituals and gift-giving rituals, but the most important element is the *panggih* ("meeting"), held at the bride's house.

To start the *panggih*, the bride and groom (below) toss small packets of betel leaves to each other to chase away evil spirits and signify their love for one another. The barefoot groom then steps on an egg (proving his readiness to be a hard-working husband), and the bride washes his feet (symbolizing her willingness to obey him). The groom

steps over a wooden yoke (he is stepping into a new life) and proceeds with the bride to a raised platform, where they sit on wedding chairs for more rituals and blessings.

The home itself is decorated with symbolic fruits and flowers: sugarcane for wisdom and determination, yellow coconuts to signify the couple's mutual love and their commitment to each other, and banana trees for prosperity. Above the doorway, ornaments made from braided coconut leaves – called *beketepe* – are hung to repel evil spirits.



Kari J. Bodnarchuk

more familiar. Then I slipped off my gold medallion, folded the pink blouse, and, at last, wriggled out of the kain. But just before crawling into bed, I pulled out those long lashes and pasted them onto a page in my journal. ♦

Kari J. Bodnarchuk, a freelance travel writer and photographer, is the author of Rwanda: Country Torn Apart and Kurdistan: Region Under Siege. She lives in Boston, Massachusetts.