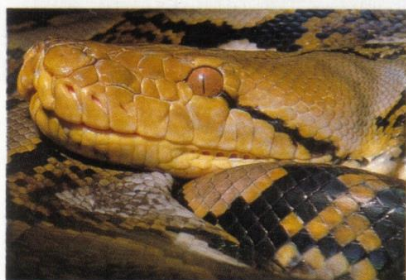


Inside the Bat Cave Of Bali



“Why would people want to worship at the entrance of a cave that is full of bats?” I ask my Balinese friend as we stand in front of Goa Lawah, on the east coast of Bali.

At the entrance, in the face of a cliff, the cave is about ten metres wide and three to five metres high. No one knows exactly how deep the cave is. Some local people believe that it goes all the way to the Besakih temple on the slopes of Gunung Agung, about thirty kilometres away.

Goa means cave and *lawah* means

small bat, and it is an appropriate name. During the day, the ceiling of the cave is lined with many thousands of bats. Estimates run up to a million or more. They are not the small, insect-eating bats, called *kampret* in Indonesian, nor the huge, fruit-eating flying foxes, or *kalong*, that live in trees. The bats of Goa Lawah are smaller fruit-eaters, called *kelelawar* or *codot*.

There are so many that they not only cling to the higher parts of the ceiling, but also settle on the walls, to within a metre of the ground. This has made them easy prey for a few pythons that also live here. One young python, only about a metre long, is suspended from a crack in the cave wall.

My friend explains that the legen-

Above: worshippers are awed by the sheer number of bats, which cling to every surface; left: pythons in the cave live well off unwary bats



Clockwise from above: worshippers sit outside the cave; offerings are placed in the shrines and on the steps in front of the cave; the entrance to the temple complex at Goa Lawah



dary giant snake *Naga Basuki* lives deep in the cave. I take his word for it. A temple complex has been built in front of the cave. A few shrines have even been erected in it. Every day hundreds of people come to Goa Lawah to worship. On religious high days it can be thousands. They come from all over Bali and beyond. They sit in front of the cave and, like ourselves, they marvel at this mysterious miracle of nature.

"I think you have the answer to your question," my friend says. "We Balinese like to worship at places where nature makes us stop dead in our tracks; places that remind you of how mysterious God's creation is. Of course, we don't pray to bats, as some tourists think. We pray to God and, as good Hindus, we find God in nature, because nature is God and God—Brahman—is nature. God is woman and God is man. God is the dark blue bee

and the green parrot with red eyes. Lightning is the child of God. In this sense the bats are also God. God is the seasons and God is the sea. God maintains eternity. It is He out of which everything is born. In Him are united Brahma, the god of creation, Vishnu,

*The eternal rhythm of
the surf can only just be heard
above the bats' squeaking*

the god of sustenance, and Shiwa, the god of destruction."

Hinduism expects everybody always to think about the mystery of life. It also commands its followers to have respect for all living creatures. There are Hindu temples in India where people feed ants; in Bali there is a temple that is dedicated to wild monkeys.

After meditation and offerings most

worshippers at Goa Lawah cross the road to the beach and make their offerings to the sea. It is an impressive sight to see a large congregation of colourfully-dressed people sitting solemnly in front of the waves, looking out over the magnificent turquoise-blue waters that surround Bali. The eternal rhythm of the surf can only just be heard above the squeaking and flapping of the bats in the cave.

I ask permission to come back to the cave in the evening, because I want to see the bats fly out. With my wife and my Balinese friend, we are the only ones at the cave at six-thirty in the evening. Dusk is just starting, and a few bats venture out of the cave, only to go back when they see that the sun is not down yet. At seven o'clock the stream of bats starts in earnest. It is a growing flow of hundreds of bats per minute. Although they fly out in enormous numbers, the thick coating of bats on the ceiling of the cave does not appear to become any thinner. An hour after the exodus has started, we still hear the stream of bats increasing, but it has become too dark to see them any longer.

The bats of Goa Lawah disperse over Bali and the neighbouring islands, feeding on fruits and berries, returning before dawn to the dark safety of their cave. G

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Denpasar in Bali is an international gateway for Garuda Indonesia