

Excerpt for BookLife

Chapter 4: Stunt Driving to Java

The ferry ride between Bali and Java looked set to be the first really terrifying part of the trip. The little bus I was on drove out gingerly towards the ferry by means of a long and very slender wooden jetty. This was a construction so narrow that, from our viewpoint in the bus, we completely and literally filled it from side to side. To step off the bus would have been to step down straight into the water. Once a vehicle had driven onto the jetty, there was no chance to go back and no escape. We were committed for better or for worse to boarding our waiting vessel.

All the passengers for Java were trapped aboard their vehicles and all nervously waiting to load onto the small wooden ferry. The reason for the general nervousness was clear: the boat up ahead was bouncing up and down with alarming energy. The vista as far as the horizon was a thick and sloppy green swell under a glowering and stormy late afternoon sky. Offshore, a stiff breeze formed sizable white-caps and promised a very lumpy crossing. I did not like the look of it at all and to cap it all off, I was very hungry. I was famished to be more accurate, with an empty stomach that growled and rumbled in noisy protest at my prolonged neglect. I had not eaten all day and had just been cheated of a meal by a little Balinese con-man, a street vendor who was probably not more than ten years old.

The diminutive swindler struck as we were waiting ashore in the small queue to drive onto the jetty. As we stood with engine idling, the youngster approached the bus at my open window and offered to sell me hard-boiled eggs from a large basket of produce. I quickly agreed to buy two eggs, and passed him money through the window. The little trickster then made a great show of finding change and being apologetic about having the wrong denominations of coins and notes in his pocket. He seemed to be busy trying to help me and he appeared to be trying his best. But when the bus drove onto the jetty two minutes later, not only did I still have no change, I had no eggs either. My last close view of him was a derisive wave as I was driven away helplessly.

Once he saw me driven on to the jetty and helpless to retaliate, he smilingly held up my money in one mocking hand and my eggs in the other. To make matters worse, a roar of appreciation from the other kids at the head of the jetty greeted this little deception. It was obviously an entertainment they were familiar with. I guessed it was a long-running joke, a well-practiced routine to fleece the foreign visitors. Realizing I had fallen for his trick hook, line, and sinker, I made a rude sign at the laughing group, but this only made them all howl with laughter even more. I gave up in disgust. A little later in the day I did manage to purchase another two hard-boiled eggs from a vendor on the boat, only to find that my run of bad luck was continuing. When peeled, they were ancient, greenish in color, and as inedible as golf balls. I decided to stay hungry.

Boarding the ferry to Java was a hazard to say the least. Vehicles loaded via a steel bridge from the boat to the dock. The problem was that the ferry was plunging up and down in a state of continual violent motion. It seemed a very unstable platform indeed, bucking and tugging at its flimsy attachment to the land like a skittish untamed beast determined to tear itself free or perish.

Access to this unsteady vessel presented a challenge of continually variable difficulty for drivers of boarding vehicles. When the ferry was up at the top of one of the greenish peaks, the steel access ramp became a steep, but quite negotiable hill. When the ramp descended to a point level with the wharf, access was perfect, but only for the briefest of instants.

The real problems arose as the ferry deck dropped below dock level. Then it forced the ramp downwards until the shoreward tip actually lifted off the dock to around shoulder height and sometimes more. All access then became impossible until the heavy steel contraption came crashing down on thick timbers perhaps twenty seconds later. At this point the ramp became briefly usable again as the whole cycle started once more.

There was a technique in vogue to negotiate this considerable peril. Accepted practice was for each vehicle to approach with its engines revving, then to accelerate onto the ferry via the moving bridge as it rose ponderously on the upward part of its cycle. The trick was to make the first move the instant the bridge became level and accessible. Speed was of the essence in completing the maneuver successfully. This meant that nearly all vehicles were arriving on the plunging ferry deck under acceleration and generally going much too fast for their own good. From my high vantage near the front of the bus I could see vehicles skidding sideways across the wet boat deck as the brakes were applied hard following the fast and hair-raising crossing.

Immediately in front of the bus was a Volkswagen Beetle, its hapless driver having a terrible time steeling himself to drive on board the ferry. He was still hesitating after a full ten minutes of assessing ways and means of getting aboard in one piece. This hesitation was despite the vocal support of the onlookers gesturing and shouting encouragement to him from the decks and the tooting horns from the waiting queue of vehicles. I did not blame him at all for hanging back. Much of the time the bridge was rearing up like a giant, blunt-edged guillotine.

Every couple of minutes saw the heavy bridge rising high above the roof-level of the Volkswagen before slamming down again hard. Each time it came down like this, it was with a force that made the whole structure of the dock shudder. From the vantage point of the driver inside the low vehicle, it must have been like driving into the jaws of a car-crusher. And it could easily have had that just that effect.

After watching several cycles of the rise and fall, the Beetle driver finally decided to make his move. It was just bad luck that even though he managed to time his attempt to board quite correctly, it was still a disaster. As the bridge reached level on its upward journey, he started as planned, but not nearly quickly enough. Then he suddenly and quite catastrophically lost his nerve as the bridge became a thirty-degree slope before his eyes. Belatedly, he decided he could not make it and tried frantically to reverse off for another go.

This was a *very* big mistake. As the luckless driver reversed, he was caught with his front wheels on the bridge and his back wheels on the wharf. He had little chance to avoid disaster as the ferry began its downward plunge into the trough.

Back on the docks, we were treated to a remarkable sight. A Volkswagen lifted, and suspended above the ground, held almost vertically upright by the end of a heavy steel bridge wedged under the front wheels. There it hung briefly, but only as a prelude to being unceremoniously dropped, pile-driver style, on its rear end on the wharf. In an unlikely

upright position, it tottered for a second or two, and then toppled forwards onto the now level bridge just in the nick of time to have the whole grim cycle repeat again. I could see the driver's anguished grimace in his strangely angled seat as the car lifted, he was looking like an astronaut awaiting lift-off. Although he was not strapped in, he was lying on his back with his knees in the air and hanging on desperately in an uncanny emulation of the last anxious minutes before ascent and orbit.

I decided I really did not want our bus to emulate that Beetle.

It was a considerably damaged Volkswagen that finally got aboard the ferry after two more attempts. The driver must have been a candidate for long term therapy and immediate strong sedation by then. I was sure he would have abandoned the attempt to get aboard altogether if there had been any way off the wharf other than via the ferry itself. In reality, the only alternative was a final despairing plunge into the green depths below. The only exit shoreward was hopelessly blocked by the snarl of waiting vehicles behind.

Eventually, he made it across, and suddenly it was our turn.