

## ***Eat, Pray, Love* fever sweeps Bali**

By Muhammad Cohen

UBUD - Bali has survived earthquakes, volcanoes, invading armies, and terrorist bombings. But can Indonesia's Island of the Gods withstand a major Hollywood motion picture starring Oscar winner Julia Roberts?

The movie adaptation of *Eat, Pray, Love*, a best-selling travel and personal growth memoir following author Elizabeth Gilbert on a year-long journey from New York through Italy, India and Indonesia, opened last week. It's fitting that each country begins with "I": *Eat, Pray, Love* suggests that no matter how self-absorbed you are, there's always more about your favorite subject you'll find intriguing.

The 2006 book, which spent 57 weeks at the No1 spot on the New York Times paperback nonfiction best-seller list, has already fueled a boom in *Eat, Pray, Love* - EPL for short - tourism in Ubud, the hill town and cultural and tourist center that's the focus of Gilbert's Bali quest for balance through traditional spirituality and healing that leads to love. "Tour operators and characters in Ubud are going nuts trying to offer up 'the EPL experience' which is just to tick off places and people in the book," travel author Ryan Ver Berkmoes reports.

"It's no different than you had in Provence after the Peter Mayle books [*A Year in Provence, A Good Year*] where tourists turned up trying to find stuff in the book. They actually didn't care at all for Provence, they just wanted to celebrity tick-mark," Ver Berkmoes, covering the EPL tourism phenomenon for several publications, says. "A lot of EPL fans - certainly not all - will come to Bali and want their version of the book. If it's not that, if they find another Bali, they will be very unhappy."

Bali native Ricka Cahayani notes expanded interest in yoga, healers, and spirituality. "Ubud has always been a place for these kinds of people, but now there are more of them. There's good and bad in that," says Cahayani, echoing the Balinese view of balanced good and evil, illustrated by the frequently seen black and white checked cloth called *poleng*.

With traffic and scammers on the negative side, "The good thing is that it makes Ubud people realize the value of their culture." Cahayani, owner of Studio 22K, a textile and crafts gallery in Ubud, also applauds outsiders broadening local horizons with ayurvedic spas and eco-friendly practices. "But some things are so exclusive and contained, local people don't see the impact."

The EPL movie boom got a head start last year with six weeks of shooting on location here. About 100 cast and crew from overseas were joined by 300 domestic technicians and performers, and hundreds of gawkers hoping for a glimpse of Roberts or fellow Oscar winner Javier Bardem (star of *No Country for Old Men*). The film shoot contributed an estimated US\$12.5 million to the local economy.



### **Aloha, Bali**

"We brought the movie here, we sold them on Bali and convinced them not to try to mimic it in Hawaii," Bali Film Center (BFC) director Deborah Gabinetti says. "I'm getting e-mails from Ubud cursing me." She expects the crowds to increase with the film's release. That's because after BFC assisted location shooting for the Korean soap opera *Incident in Bali* South Korean visitor numbers spiked.

In early 2007, EPL executive producer Stan Wlodkowski called Gabinetti to probe the potential for shooting in Bali, and BFC assisted his initial visit. In October that year, Gabinetti invited Wlodkowski to the Balinale Film Festival she co-founded to help close the deal. "The reason for Stan to come to the festival was to meet filmmakers and to see that there is a viable film industry here that could support shooting." This

October, Balinale is hosting the Jakarta and Bali premieres of EPL.

One Ubud institution has remained relatively EPL-free, though not entirely by choice. Ubud Writers and Readers Festival founder Janet de Neefe says that they've invited Elizabeth Gilbert several times but conflicts have prevented her from attending. This year's seventh festival, running from October 6-10, has no explicitly EPL-themed events, though de Neefe, a restaurateur and cookbook author, says, "We do explore eating with culinary programs, and praying, including a program with a healer, and, of course, love and romance are central to literature."

Living in Ubud since 1984, de Neefe says EPL fever is part of a general rise in Bali tourism. The island is in the midst of its fourth consecutive year of double-digit growth in visitor arrivals. After a record 2.2 million foreign visitors in 2009, this year's arrivals project to hit 2.5 million, double the second Bali bombing-depressed total of 2006. Those figures don't include an undocumented massive rise in domestic tourists as Indonesian incomes rise.

"More local shops and *warungs* [small restaurants] are disappearing," de Neefe says. "More shops are run by non-Ubud folks. It worries me that we're losing the local contact that was so much a part of the tourist experience." Despite the negatives, de Neefe says, "Ubud still has a very strong cultural presence. The Ubud community works things out."

### **Billions unserved**

Diana Darling, another longtime Ubud resident and author of *The Painted Word*, a novel based on Balinese folklore, says, "Tourism is out of control - but who do you want to control it? Perhaps not the government. The Ministry of Tourism is interested mainly in ever higher volume. The local government is interested mainly in [entertainment](#)."

Darling, former editor of the award-winning national magazine *Latitudes*, says, "Ubud's gridlock, horrible sidewalks and inflated prices might mean that none of the hundreds of tourists who come here every day will ever come back - but there are still several billion people on earth who haven't been to Ubud yet, and [tour](#) agencies will keep trying to capture them and send them uphill."

How much the film version of *Eat, Pray, Love* will impact that future remains an open question. Early reviews of the movie have been decidedly mixed. A review headlined "Eat, Pray, Hurl" branded the movie "as profound as perfume". Another called it "beautiful to look at, impossible to care about". Critics have been particularly rough on the Bali segment as overly long and rife with cliches. Even so, the movie was the second-most watched in US and Canadian theaters at the weekend, the first since its release, pulling in US\$23.7 million for Sony Corp and behind only *The Expendables*, which earned \$35 million, according to Bloomberg News, citing a statement from Hollywood.com Box-Office.

One reviewer attacked the script as insipid, before realizing that it was simply following the book. The film gives EPL a wider platform to spread the banality of the book that has already proven so popular. If, like the Balinese, you believe in the balance of *poleng*, surely some good is due to come of it.

*Former broadcast news producer **Muhammad Cohen** told America's story to the world as a US diplomat and is author of [Hong Kong On Air](#), a novel set during the 1997 handover about television news, love, betrayal, financial crisis, and cheap lingerie. Follow [Muhammad Cohen's blog](#) for more on the media and Asia, his adopted home.*

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