

ONCE THERE WERE TIGERS

Mark Eveleigh treks through a jungle in Bali's Wild West. Pictures by the author

THE INDONESIANS HAVE

a poetic name for the sun. As my hammock swings gently, 'the eye of the day' does indeed appear to be winking through the jungle canopy.

It's a common misconception that dawn is a peaceful time in the rainforest, but nature comes with its own piercing range of wake-up calls. At daybreak the forest reverberates with the din of unseen wildlife. The cicadas that were singing amorously when I climbed into my hammock are now signing off on their last piercing notes. Somewhere across the valley, I can hear the harsh cough of a barking deer. The troop of so-called black monkeys that followed us to our camp last night echo the alarm – perhaps in the mistaken belief that there are still tigers in these hills. It's hard

to believe that the expanse of tropical rainforest around us is part of the holiday island of Bali.

I slide out of my hammock and head over to the campfire where my guide, Made Budha Yasa, is already pouring sweet, black Balinese *kopi*. "We have a long walk ahead of us," he smiles as he hands me a steaming cup. "But *plan-plan* – slowly-slowly. It's the Balinese way..."

His talk is interrupted by a strange chugging sound filtering down through the canopy. The noise reminds me of something from my past. Then it dawns on me: it sounds exactly like a commuter train pulling into Kings Cross Station. But my life in London is half a world away and, as two flapping shadows pass over the trees, I realise that it comes from the wings of a pair of hornbills. All over Indonesia, hornbills are considered birds of good omen, and I look over

“

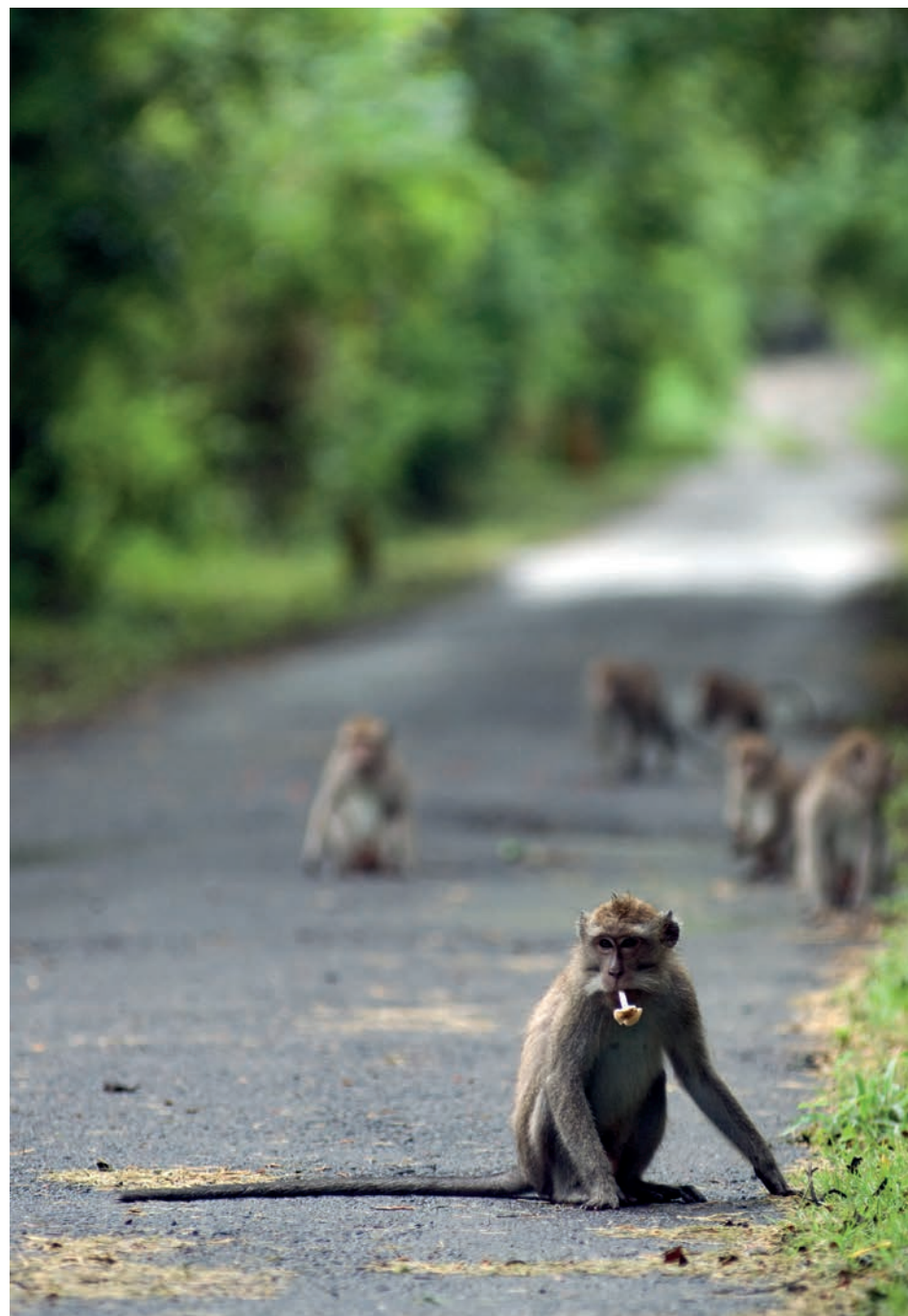
NATURE COMES WITH ITS OWN PIERCING RANGE OF WAKE-UP CALLS

at Made to see that my smile of delight is reflected on his face.

I'd met up with Made at a remote and tranquil little haven on Bali's western coast. As the head guide at the lovely Puri Dajuma Cottages, he's known as one of the best people to lead an expedition into the untamed jungle at the centre of West Bali National Park. Made picked a team of similarly enthusiastic assistants and arranged for our park permits from the park headquarters. We stocked up with enough provisions to last us for several days and, after a last sumptuous meal on Puri Dajuma's hardwood veranda, enjoyed what would be our last night's sleep in cool sheets within earshot of the pounding rollers of the Bali Sea.

West Bali National Park stretches across 700 square kilometres of densely forested hills and valleys, occupying most of the western side of Bali. The park,

»



known locally as Taman Nasional Bali Barat, was founded in 1941 to protect the last remnants of the local tiger population. In 1942 naturalist Charles Barrett wrote that 'tigers were numerous in the highlands at the western end of Bali, a region covered in dense tropical forest and uninhabited; much of it still unexplored.' By a sad quirk of fate, however, it's now believed that the last Bali Tiger was shot five years earlier.

Even today, the national park remains virtually unknown. It is the last bastion of the Balinese black monkey and the Bali starling, one of the world's rarest birds. An avian dream, with glossy white



**I WAS
ASTONISHED
TO REALISE
THAT THIS
FOREST
BOASTED
WHAT WAS
CERTAINLY
THE BEST
WILDLIFE
SPOTTING
I'D EVER
ENJOYED IN
SOUTHEAST
ASIA**

plumes and shocking blue eyes, fewer than 20 wild starlings are said to remain in these forests. There is a breeding station deep in the jungle, however, where more than 80 birds are protected inside a jungle fortress, complete with machine-gun watchtowers and a small army of Kalashnikov-toting guards.

We left the coast shortly after dawn, and within an hour were already climbing above the last of the terraced paddy fields where, even today, buffalo are still used to till the rich volcanic soil. We walked through semi-wild plantations where we could refresh ourselves with bananas,

hairy *rambutan* fruit and the weird scaly bulbs of snake-fruit.

At the edge of the jungle itself, Made stopped beside one of the majestic old banyan trees that are found all over the island. Like so many other venerable old trees, this was considered a sacred spot to the Balinese, and it would be foolhardy for us to enter deeper into the wilderness without making a traditional offering.

We waited respectfully while Made tied on his ceremonial headdress and a sarong and placed a little woven basket of offerings at the base of the mighty trunk. His voice was lowered in respect, so that his mumbled prayers

seemed almost to dissolve into the swirling wisps of incense.

Although I didn't realise it yet, this was a ceremony that would be repeated at every campsite and resting place on our trek. We could not begin clearing an area for our hammocks before Made had made two tiny altars. He explained that one of these altars would protect us from the malignant ghosts and spirits that haunt jungle clearings, and the other would show the gods that we were acting respectfully in chopping the few saplings and collecting the wood that we needed for our campfire.

Unfortunately it is not a respect that is shown universally by all

in the region. The Balinese blame poaching in the park on new arrivals from overcrowded Java. Even so, I was astonished to realise that this forest boasted what was certainly the best wildlife spotting I'd ever enjoyed in Southeast Asia. Even during my frequent expeditions through Indonesian Borneo and Sumatra, I'd rarely been in a jungle where wildlife was so frequently visible. Within our first morning of trekking, we'd seen the three resident deer (barking deer, sambar and mousedeer), giant monitor lizards and two of the park's three resident primate species.

We trekked for two more days

Previous pages: Balinese religious offerings are the simplest manifestation of the islanders' great talent for crafts.

These pages (clockwise from left): Sambar deer on the beach in West Bali National Park. Macaques at the side of the road. A jety at Brumbun Bay. A campfire in Brumbun Bay, Java's Ijen Volcano smoulders on the background.

without seeing any other visitors, and as I lay in my hammock on the last night – gratefully cocooned in my mosquito net amid the nocturnal calls of the jungle – I thought of a phrase that Made had taught me. It seemed to illustrate perfectly the respect with which the Balinese treat their 'island of the gods'.

"We say that the people do not own the land," he explained slowly. "The gods have just lent it to us for safe keeping."

The Balinese are proud of the island that is often described as the most beautiful in the world. They say that when they die, heaven will be just like Bali.

