



Indonesia, Etc.: Exploring the Improbable Nation

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Jakarta tweets more than any other city on earth, but 80 million Indonesians live without electricity and many of its communities still share in ritual sacrifices. Declaring independence in 1945, Indonesia said it would “work out the details of the transfer of power etc. as soon as possible.” With over 300 ethnic groups spread across 13,500 islands, the world’s fourth most populous nation has been working on that “etc.” ever since. Bewitched by Indonesia for twenty-five years, Elizabeth Pisani recently traveled 26,000 miles around the archipelago in search of the links that bind this impossibly disparate nation. Fearless and funny, Pisani shares her deck space with pigs and cows, bunks down in a sulfurous volcano, and takes tea with a corpse. Along the way, she observes Big Men with child brides, debates corruption and cannibalism, and ponders “sticky” traditions that cannot be erased.

Indonesia, Etc.: Exploring the Improbable Nation Details

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Mal Warwick says

If you're like most Americans, chances are you know little or nothing about Indonesia. Yet that island nation is the world's fourth largest by population (after China, India, and the USA) and fifteenth largest by land area (just after Mexico). It also is home to the world's largest population of Muslims. Indonesia consists of "a string of 13,466 islands inhabited by people from over 360 ethnic groups, who between them speak 719 languages." If armchair exploring appeals to you, then you'll love *Indonesia Etc.*, Elizabeth Pisani's memoir of her 13-month journey through what she terms "the improbable nation."

No run-of-the-mill travel writer

Pisani is no run-of-the-mill travel writer. She lived in Indonesia for three years as a reporter for Reuters (1988-91) and returned for another four-year stay a decade later after training as an epidemiologist specializing in AIDS. (Today, Pisani runs a public-health consultancy in London.) It's clear from context in the book that she is fluent and comfortable in the lingua franca of the islands, Indonesian. Equally important, Pisani is one tough lady. Even as a youngster, I wouldn't have dreamed of subjecting myself to the rigors of her 13-month odyssey.

Colorful and engaging anecdotes

Indonesia Etc. is full of colorful and engaging anecdotes of the sort that will be familiar to anyone who has traveled extensively in the Third World. There is, for example, a hilarious tale of a Crocodile Whisperer, a shaman who presented himself as able to persuade the crocodiles in one region to identify and shun the one beast in their midst that had eaten a local woman. In other tales, Pisani recounts her experiences wearing the wrong batik design to the coronation of a local sultan and with a Koran-reading contest. "Koran-reading contests are as popular in Indonesia as visits by Manchester United's touring team."

Then there was her effort to travel from small island to another. "'Is there a schedule for the boat to Lonthor?' I yelled across to the boatmen. 'Of course!' they yelled back. 'When do you leave?' I bellowed. 'When the boat is full!' came the reply."

Pisani emphasizes again and again the warm hospitality and sense of humor she encountered everywhere in Indonesia. After casual meetings on boats or buses, local people unhesitatingly invited her to live with them in their homes and share their food for days on end. Just imagine that happening in New York or Los Angeles!

Indonesia's blood-soaked history

In *Indonesia Etc.*, Pisani delves deeply into the history, politics, and economics of Indonesia. Amid her tales of days spent in tiny settlements or on leaky, slow-moving boats from island to island, she explores the history of this extraordinarily diverse and rich nation. Most of the time since the country gained independence from the Dutch in 1945 Indonesia has been dominated by two men whose legacies remain evident to the present day: Sukarno (1945-67) and Suharto (1968-98). Pisani recounts their years with rich detail about the tumultuous times during which they presided over the nation.

One event stands out: the massacre that brought Suharto to power. In the course of three years, at least half a million, and as many as three million Communists, ethnic Chinese, and alleged leftists were brutally murdered. Hundreds of thousands more were raped, driven from their homes, or saw their businesses

destroyed.

As Pisani writes, "The carnage wiped out a whole generation of socially committed activists and pulled up the roots from which they might regrow. It crippled the development of political debate and made Indonesian citizens wary of political allegiance." For decades afterward, the Indonesian military ran rampant through the breakaway provinces of East Timor and Aceh as well as other regions that sought independence for themselves.

Indonesia today: one of the world's most decentralized nations

From Pisani's perspective, Sukarno and Suharto followed radically divergent political paths. Sukarno moved to centralize government, imposing rigid control from the country's most populous island (Java) on the rest of the country and launching a satellite to carry news in the Indonesian language throughout the archipelago. Suharto initiated decentralization, devolving power onto local government.

"At a stroke," Pisani writes, "the world's fourth most populous nation and one of its most centralized burst apart to become one of its most decentralized. The centre still takes care of defence, fiscal policy, foreign relations, religious affairs, justice and planning. But everything else—health, education, investment policy, fisheries and a whole lot more—was handed over to close to 300 district 'governments,' whose only experience of governing had, until then, been to follow orders from Jakarta."

In myriad ways, Pisani shows how the move to decentralization has been a disaster for Indonesia. When she wrote her book in 2012, the number of district governments had grown to 509, virtually every one of them a fiefdom for the local elite and rife with corruption. ("Papua's wealth used to be stolen by Jakarta. Now it's stolen by the Papuan elite.") Yet, as Pisani takes pains to point out, "No other nation has welded so much difference together into so generally peaceable a whole in the space of less than seventy years."

Indonesia's endemic corruption

As the author explains, "A small fraction of jobs in the bureaucracy are awarded based on competitive exams. But most of the jobs that are not given out to political supporters get sold . . . The minister in charge of the 'state apparatus' recently said that 95 percent of Indonesia's 4.7 million civil servants didn't have the skills they needed to do their jobs." Many Indonesians attribute their country's endemic corruption to the legacy of Dutch colonialism. Compared to the English, the Dutch provided few educational opportunities for their subjects. However, Indonesia has been independent for seven decades. Blaming colonialism is a bit of a stretch.

An "improbable nation?"

Pisani subtitles her book Exploring the Improbable Nation. She makes clear that Indonesia's unmatched diversity, island geography, and complex history could well have resulted in many different countries rather than one. There's no disputing this. However, to a somewhat lesser degree, the same might be said of many of the European countries that are generally regarded as the most stable and logical nation-states in the world: Italy, Germany, France, Spain, even England. Dig beneath the surface in any one of these countries, and you'll find the nation-building that occurred in centuries past was anything but an inevitable outcome. All these countries are rife with regional differences in culture, history, and even language. To be sure, the regional differences are by no means as stark as they are in Indonesia, but it would be a mistake to assume that the emergence of these countries as unitary political units was foreordained.

mellyana says

Oh Elizabeth Pisani, thank you so much!

I have such tremendous pleasure reading it. A refreshing view of my nation - that is, if it is exist. Max Lane said it is unfinished nation. I think, you give the right words: Improbable Nation.

Not everything new but I just haven't seen them in writing. I enjoy your interpretation of many things found in this country, from the common to not-too-common things. I like the Eastern Indonesia journey more than Western. I guess, I am not big fans of habit in Sumatera even if I should be proud because they are my ancestor.

If one wants to "go native" in this country, I'd like to ask "which native". There's just one too many. Often contradicts each other. You show us the many paradox found in this country. Beautifully crazy. Modern in traditional way - if that is possible. Just like one of the nation dishes: gado-gado.

It is rare to find a "must read" book that is also fun to read. A page turner.

????? ?????????????? says

Chrissie says

The author's extensive research and knowledge of Indonesia makes this a worthwhile read. The book is primarily based on her thirteen months of travel over Indonesia during 2011-2012. The route covered small rural villages and large cities (Jakarta and Surabaya), 20 provinces and the four main islands Sumatra, Sulawesi, Indonesian New Guinea aka Papua, and Kalimantan on Borneo. The cultural diversity of Indonesia is so wide that although her travels cannot be considered all-inclusive, they are a good start. The author has been a Reuters journalist as well as a reporter for The Economist and the Asia Times. With Reuters she was stationed in Indonesia twenty years before the writing of this book. Even these experiences add to her knowledge and the content of the book. Now she is working as an epidemiologist on HIV/AIDS.

I found the organization of the book weak. This is my prime complaint. It is this that makes it hard to absorb the information provided. Chapters focused on the respective topics of religion, history, politics and cultural traditions would have helped. Instead the writing is journalistic in tone. Essentially it reads as a travelogue with factual snippets on history, politics and religion thrown in. You are given interesting examples but little comprehensive structure to the information.

While the author is fluent in Indonesian, she was not fluent in the languages of some of the remote sites visited. The people she spoke with were for the most part strangers, not long-time friends, even if Indonesians as a people are open, welcoming and friendly. She did not reveal her true identity to them; one cannot but wonder if they revealed their innermost thoughts or the complete truth about themselves.

It helps to have a map of Indonesia accessible while listening to the audiobook.

The audiobook narration is by Jan Cramer. It is fast but clear. With time I grew accustomed to the speed. The tone is light.

Caroline says

This got excellent reviews and they were right.

First of all, you have to admire Pisani for sheer guts and fortitude. She set off on a minuscule budget to hopscotch all over Indonesia for a year, climbed aboard rickety ferries, vans and motorcycle taxis, said 'yes' to invitations to come stay with them for a few days that were issued by just-met Indonesians who lived in huts, longhouses, and related shelters, ate unbelievable stews of blobby stuff, ventured into contentious situations to ask a journalist's pointed questions, waded through mudpits and jungles, joined the scramble to see the cornered woman-eating crocodile, and generally dared whatever would take her face to face with all the variety that is Indonesia. And in exchange she made hundreds of friends and learned enough to share her enthusiastic and positive version of that country with us.

One vision of Indonesia that comes alive is the land where people have figured out their life-work balance. In some parts of the countryside acquiring enough eating takes an absolute minimum of effort, leaving time to

enjoy life:

It wasn't all lounging around watching TV at Mama Lina's. Now that the rains had started, it was planting time. We each took a sharpened stick, stabbed it into the ground in the most easily accessible spots, tossed in a couple of dried maize kernels, kicked the earth over it with our feet, moved on. It seemed impossible to me that the earth would reward our paltry effort with something edible, but Mama Lina texted me a couple of months later to report that she was cooking the maize I had planted.

It's that contrast between pointed stick agriculture and texting that strikes one over and over again in this book.

On a nearby page she describes a grandmother-and-grandchildren hike to obtain casava root for hog food, interrupted by bites of mango or rose-apple plucked from convenient trees and frequent rest breaks. A few days of work can result in enough food for the year.

In other places, Pisani meets pieceworkers who make false eyelashes or peel onions all day long to earn a pittance. Tuna fishermen who hope the fuel and ice hold out long enough to catch enough fish to make a dollar or two. Entrepreneurs scrambling to build a small local empire.

Pisani has lived off and on in Indonesia as a reporter and public health advisor since 1988. She's reported on plenty of violence, military and rebel, and on government corruption. This time she traveled purposely to collect material for this book. She speaks Indonesian, the common language born of trading talk that is the lingua franca of the nation, so she could move independently. And she must be uncommonly engaging, to have gained entree to so many lives. She certainly had to be adaptable, because she was traveling in a country where there are thousands of *adat*, or sets of rules and customs that make up a local culture.

Pisani inserts sufficient doses of Indonesian history as she moves among the islands to provide context for her story of the moment, without bogging down. She certifies our expectations of corruption, environmental damage (cleared jungle, poisoned reefs) and sectarian violence. But generally she puts the violence down to underlying economic issues, not ideology or religion itself. And in fact, she claims the corruption is one of the things, along with the webs of personal networks, that knits the country together. The decentralization that followed Suharto's regime means that money flows from Jakarta to local big men (Bupati) and favored contractors, etc., so there is some incentive to stay connected to the center.

Most of all, Pisani communicates her delight at the people and customs she finds. She attends funerals and weddings, celebrates old customs and smiles at youthful rural attempts at Jakarta hip, and delights in the landscape. She hears from local activists and unofficial historians about massacres, elections, the tsunami, illegal logging. But she also sees widespread resourcefulness, community cooperation, and a *generosity of spirit, a tolerance of difference*. And concludes, the country is all right. Not perfect, not without challenges, but with resources to thrive.

Melissa Lauw says

Growing up in Jakarta with Chinese-Indonesian parents in a middle class family, I was prone to generalizing the Indonesian society for as long as I can remember. "Ah, orang indo mah emang gitu" (Indonesians are just like that) is something that I frequently hear (and spoke of) to dismiss the various disorderly behaviors easily spotted in traffic-filled Jakarta. It's only on the last few months that culminates and ended with the end of this

book, that I realize how diverse and culturally rich - with all the potential of conflict that comes with it - this country really is.

I learnt history and geography on Indonesia, of course. I know that there's Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Sulawesi, and Papua. I also do think that through the innumerable ethnicities that exist we got innumerable traditions, some that are largely romanticized for tourism. Typical knowledge and opinion coming from some teenager who really know nothing. Because really, I have never stepped out of the cocoons of the most modernized parts of Indonesia. I barely knew about the conflict in Timor or Borneo or Aceh that shaped the power dynamics today. I knew that there are suku that only had little contact with the 'modern' world, but I have no idea who they are, where they live and what they act like. I have no clue that Indonesia was only decentralized less than two decades ago, and that the country's income are distributed based on the economy of those areas. I have no clue that to some Indonesians in the more remote islands, whether the country exist or not, it does not matter. Elizabeth Pisani wrote about all of those, and more.

The writer, a foreigner coming from some faraway country, have travelled extensively from Sabang to Merauke, and have compiled her various visits into this book. The collection of stories inside it, written as if a journal in an easygoing manner, shows the political, economic, and cultural conditions in the pockets of areas that she visited. People residing in the tropical forest of Sumatra who were affected by the rampant destruction. People who still conduct marriage transactions. People who were evicted because their villages were burned to the ground in light of religious tension. People who teaches at 12 PM even though the school started at 7 AM. People who are educated, but too afraid to escape the social norms of their ethnicity. People who have never lived in metropolitan Jakarta, a city vastly outgrowing and overdeveloping in comparison to the rest of Indonesia, where lots are left behind.

I would recommend this to anyone with even the tiniest interest in Indonesia. Because if it's a comprehensive understanding and thorough exploration you wanted, Elizabeth manages to do that with a writing style that is easily digested. But there is a specific group of people who I think /should/ absolutely read it. People like me - young, quite ignorant, complained about the conditions of Indonesia without trying to understand the extent of its complexity. For me, this book gives me an understanding of why this country is as it is, and in a way, acceptance of its condition.

This book might not have captured the whole Indonesian world. But it did fill the holes in my knowledge that I would never have gotten without emulating the journey the writer has taken herself.

Michael Joyce says

This was a fantastic book. I've been living in Indonesia for two years, but this book shows me how I've only just scratched the surface of a complicated and perplexing country. It's insightful on many levels; personal, cultural, social, political and economical and I thoroughly recommend it.

Anfri Bogart says

Elizabeth Pisani si è girata tutta l'Indonesia da sola. L'Indonesia è una nazione improbabile perché in realtà, essendo immensa, è composta da molte popolazioni e dai più disparati territori. E' stata tenuta unita prima dal pugno di ferro di Suharto, che ha cercato di reprimere ogni particolarismo, poi dopo la sua caduta ha

evitato il dissolvimento grazie ad un decentramento molto spinto che ha consentito ad ogni regione di avere la sua propria amministrazione.

Il viaggio di Elizabeth è quindi una fantasmagoria di usanze, costumi, religioni, comportamenti, lingue, colori, il tutto unito da un'unica impalpabile matrice comune, che individuerai nella profonda umanità dei suoi abitanti, da intendere in senso molto ampio (vale a dire nei suoi pregi e nei suoi difetti).

Gli strumenti della Pisani, donna nubile e senza figli in viaggio in un paese dove è inconcepibile non avere una famiglia, sono ironia, apertura mentale e soprattutto amore per questa umanità senza limiti che caratterizza la gente dell'Indonesia, capace di accogliere in casa propria una sconosciuta e allo stesso tempo di abbandonarsi alla violenza più spietata.

John says

An excellent travel narrative of the nation, beyond the tourist zones of Jakarta and Bali. Pisani visits some fairly remote areas, running across ethnicities that even the folks in the cities aren't aware of themselves ("It's all 'tribal' out there ..."). While she does a great job in relating stories that weren't so funny at the time, but she can laugh at them now (such as going back into a quicksand-like mudhole to retrieve a sandal out of sheer determination); however, the sections of the legal system, and ecological problems, were a bit grim.

Definitely recommended for an insight into the country from a westerner who has spent serious time there, speaking the language fluently. Audio narrator was well-matched to the material.

Adisudewa says

Blusukan ala Bule

Pada awalnya saya skeptis. Seorang bule, traveling sendirian selama satu tahun di berbagai daerah di Indonesia. Apa yang akan ia dapatkan dari perjalanan selama itu selain tulisan klise tentang eksotisme keindahan alam Indonesia, serta kulit yang terbakar dan kaki yang pegal?

Di tangan Elizabeth Pisani, perjalannya menjelajahi Sumba, Sawu, Tual, Halmahera Tengah, Sangihe, Bau-bau di Indonesia Timur, hingga Aceh, Jambi, dan Pontianak di Indonesia Barat, mampu dituangkan menjadi sebuah catatan perjalanan yang memikat.

Elizabeth bukanlah seorang "Pakar Indonesia" dari Cornell atau Australian National University. Ia adalah seorang jurnalis (eks Reuter) dan juga pakar ilmu kesehatan dengan gelar PhD dari Inggris. Ia mendalami Indonesia dengan gayanya sendiri, dengan segala kecintaan yang ia miliki terhadap Indonesia, dan dengan gaya sok akrabnya terhadap semua orang yang ia temui di jalan. Hampir tidak ada sejengkal tanah dan gestur manusia Indonesia yang lepas dari pengamatannya.

Inilah buku yang berhasil merangkum berbagai hal yang perlu diketahui oleh orang Indonesia selevel "middle class" mengenai negerinya sendiri. Jika anda memendam hasrat ingin menjelajah Indonesia, tapi tidak pernah punya waktu, Elizabeth telah melakukannya untuk anda.

Saat kita sibuk berdebat di Facebook mengenai BPJS dan Kartu Indonesia Sehat, Elizabeth sedang berbincang dengan seorang ibu tua yang harus naik kapal selama 3 hari untuk mencapai kota kabupaten di

Maluku yang bisa mengobati sakitnya. Ibu tua ini tidak pergi ke Kupang, yang lebih dekat dan lengkap peralatan medisnya, karena ia terdaftar sebagai penduduk provinsi Maluku.

Saat kita membahas tentang “tol laut” di Indonesia Timur, Elizabeth sedang ngobrol dengan seorang nelayan di Sangihe yang menjual ikan tuna tangkapannya ke pembeli di General Santos, Filipina, yang berani membayar lebih mahal karena punya akses ekspor tuna langsung ke Jepang.

Saat kita bangga karena festival budaya daerah sedang marak di berbagai tempat, Elizabeth dengan jeli mengamati bahwa seringkali festival seperti ini lebih menjadi ajang pamer kekuasaan dari para bupati dan bukan upaya serius untuk mempelajari dan melestarikan budaya daerah.

Line favorit saya dari buku ini bukanlah tentang cerita petualangan sang penulis, tapi tentang kritiknya terhadap para pengamat dan analis ekonomi Indonesia yang mengamati Indonesia dari Jakarta atau Hong Kong. Kritiknya yang paling pedas ia tujuhan pada McKinsey & Company.

“McKinsey Global Institute sangat terkesan dengan prospek Indonesia sehingga mereka melompati [analisa tentang] kelas menengah dan nilai-nilai menabung dan berinvestasi, dan memperkirakan bahwa Indonesia akan menjadi kaya melalui berbelanja. ‘... akan ada 85 juta konsumen baru — orang-orang dengan pendapatan bersih lebih dari \$300 per bulan— dibandingkan angka sekarang 55 juta’”.

Yang paling ia kritik adalah metode riset yang dilakukan oleh McKinsey — “mereka berkonsultasi dengan banyak ahli dari latar belakang akademis, pemerintahan dan industri: sembilan menteri, dua duta besar, dan tujuh puluh lima ekonom dan pemimpin industri.”

Elizabeth Pisani bukanlah seorang ahli tentang Indonesia, bahkan setelah buku ini terbit. Tapi menurut saya ia lebih dari seorang pakar karena ialah mungkin orang pertama yang melakukan blusukan ke seluruh wilayah Indonesia, mendahului Jokowi yang baru melakukannya di Solo dan Jakarta.

Harga: e-Book \$.99 (Kagi), hard copy \$20.50 (Amazon) - dua-duanya versi Bahasa Inggris, versi Bahasa Indonesia belum tersedia

Jacqie says

Read this book as prep for going abroad to Indonesia next year. I'm not sure I could have chosen a better one!

The author has lived in Indonesia in various guises at various times. Sometimes a journalist, sometimes an AIDS outreach worker, this time she's got a book advance and her plan was to travel where transportation will take her, say yes to everything she can, and learn more about this country.

After reading this book, it seems impossible to truly know Indonesia. It is the fourth largest country in the world population-wise, has over 700 languages, perhaps over 17,000 islands, and stretches the equivalent of Alaska to Washington DC. Different racial types, lifestyles ranging from sophisticated big city to subsistence farming, impossible to see it all. One thing I learned after reading this book- don't expect transportation to be on time or possibly exist at all! That steered me clear of trying to get to some of the remoter islands for the best scuba diving. I have medical issues that mean I shouldn't be too far from a hospital, and it sounds like I'd best stick to places that are near large cities or airports.

The author frames her book chronologically. She starts off and winds her way through the islands, depending on what boat she can catch, and sometimes her plans change accordingly. Each chapter also has a sub-theme. She has an amazing gift of being able to write about incidents and people she meets and bringing these encounters to life, and then being able to weave information and history to relate to these encounters seamlessly. This is the ideal of non-fiction writing, and I've got to say that she nails it. In 50 pages, she's outlined the history of these islands since the Dutch took over the Spice Islands export trade to when Indonesia declared independence after WWII, meanwhile introducing you to village life and culture. She also discusses politics and the patronage system/corruption that makes the whole country run (or not), the school system, economics and the standard of living imbalances rife within Indonesia, religion and how it relates to culture and power dynamics, and more.

I started out with a very strong rating for the book, but it diminished. Why? Simply put, as amusingly as the author portrayed this country, I started getting depressed at the idea of picking up the book. The author keeps a rather British detached sense of humor at all the corruption, poverty and violence that she sees. She discusses in depth how warm and welcoming everyone is, but also how they seem ready to kill each other at the drop of a hat. Was she ever scared when those young army boys she described came driving by on their way to teach some upstarts a lesson? To me it's almost more frightening when perfectly warm and generous people will also whip out their machetes in defense of a point of honor without hesitation. In the end, the author felt almost a bit condescending in her approach to these people. She fell a bit into the childlike happy native stereotype in her description, also making the Jakarta socialites seem like wannabes with their attempts at fashion and culture, and the corrupt politicians seemed also joke-worthy, silly ignorant men puffed up with their own importance (which may be true, but these men also do have incredible control over finances and well-being for their districts). Maybe as a journalist the author sees all people with this sort of distance and would find me a middle-aged white woman who is getting all het up about her book from the comfort of her air-conditioned, luxurious American home, but I am what I am, I guess. My home is air-conditioned and I never worry about my next meal, but it's just random chance that I'm not living in a thatched hut, not ever getting an education because teaching posts are sinecures and most of those who get them are barely bothered to teach, and using swept-up hair from salons to make as many fake eyelashes as I can for pennies on the dollar of what they sell for. Maybe that's kinda funny? But it's also kinda not.

So, a purely emotional reaction is keeping me from rating this book higher. I can acknowledge that it does a grand job of covering a vast amount of information, while also attaching to individual people. If you're going to Indonesia, I would definitely recommend it. I'd also note that while 60% of the population lives on Java, and in Jakarta specifically the population is extremely dense, the author has opted out of focusing on those areas and preferred the smaller remote islands. That's a great way to see the lesser-known Indonesia, but I think it gives short shrift to where most Indonesians live and work. The other thing I'd say is that tourism plays no part in this book. As someone who works in tourism, I found this stood out. Almost 10% of Indonesia's income and employment comes from tourism, and that's probably worth some exploration. Maybe the author thought that everyone is going to find out about Bali anyway, and wanted to explore lesser-known islands. Maybe she didn't want to get pegged and treated as a tourist. I don't know, but it was a curious omission.

What was repetitive were the themes of corruption and resignation. Everyone seems to expect corruption, and occasionally get mad at it, but also accept it as just the way things are. That's also probably a reason I ended up getting depressed while reading it. I read to escape, and corruption and the lack of idea of what to do about it are everywhere I turn. And, yeah, I suppose when that's life sometimes the only thing to do is laugh.

Dave Schoettinger says

Although Ms. Pisani has lots of facts and figures on Indonesia, the strong point of the book is that it is mostly about her interactions with everyday Indonesians in everyday situations, riding ferries, planting crops, attending funerals, riding motorbikes, etc. Her ability to show the unique Indonesian perspective while showing that people are pretty much people wherever you go shines through the book and makes for compelling reading.

Mercia Wijaya says

At last, finished reading this book. As a born-and-bred Indonesian, I can say this is the most complete book about modern Indonesia I've ever read, as it combines travel journals, cultural events reports, political and economics commentaries, backed by citations from sociologists, with snippets of ordinary people's life taken from a not-so-foreign-anymore-foreigner's point of view. I like the way everything blends in a flowing yet chaotic manner: that's the way life goes in Indonesia. I would also praise the author for her neutral stance: too often similar books written by Indonesians are too patriotic to the extent of fanatic, while those written by foreigners often minuscule local wisdom as they try to fit Indonesia inside their contemporary Western culture box.

By the way, disclaimer first, this book is very rich in details, especially in describing physical objects, so don't be fooled with the number of page: you will need to spend extra time picturing in mind something exclusive to Indonesia (and for Indonesians, you still need to spare time to decode what is the two-word Indonesian phrase behind a fifty-word paragraph).

For my non-Indonesian friends, I recommend you to read this book to shatter stereotypes about Indonesia; the real and complete 13466-island Indonesia, not just the typical Java and Bali you heard from someone's holiday, not just the typical highly criminal and hot tempered Jakarta, Surabaya or Medan you heard from those "lucky" ones who escape from "Indonesian" cruelty.

For my Indonesian friends, especially those from bigger cities, I also recommend you to read this book. You'll learn more about what is really happening in other parts of Indonesia from this book compare to your Orde Baru censored IPS textbooks. You'll be amazed how daily phenomenon for Indonesian can be seen in an interesting light.

Overall, I give a 4 out of 5 stars for this book. I spare the last star due to my personal preference of reading more narrative rather than descriptive writing, and for the author's tendency to choose lengthy phrases spammed with dramatic words (which have reduced dramatic effects as they become the norm).

By the way, reading this book in Jakarta makes me feel like I'm one its antagonistic character, if you know what I mean.

Silvana says

Just realized it took me a month to finish this book. It is not that it is a heavy read, but the dose of reality given here made me having to retire after a few chapters, reflect, then continue.

This is a book I would recommend to anyone who wants to know about my country. Indonesia is multifaceted, multilayered entity with complexities that even I, born and bred there, could not really fathom, let alone explained. This book does a great job in doing that. I laughed (heartily and bitterly), I frowned, I almost cried, I nodded, I contemplated.

The author at the end tried to soften her opinion on the fate of the country by saying that our own unique collectivism is a double edged sword, it could kill us but it also prevents us from being torn apart. I am not so sure. One edge is sharper than the other; one spark is all it takes to get people killed in the war on economic access.

Life goes on, yes, but you never know what kind of chaos lurks behind the shadows. Ignorance is still a disease and we can't rely on... er, collectivism, as the only medicine. Most of our young generation with their fancy smartphones sitting at Starbucks are as ignorant as their parents. They care about the environment less than they care about wifi connection. Begitulah disini... That's how it goes here. There is still hope of course. But forgive me for being so pessimistic.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

‘Indonesia’s diversity is not just geographic and cultural; different groups are essentially living at different points in human history, all at the same time.’

Indonesia is a country of between 13,466 and 17, 504 islands, depending on whose figures you accept. Of this number, between 6,000 and 7,000 are inhabited and they stretch over 5,200 kilometres Aceh at the north-western tip of Sumatra to Papua in the south-east. This vast nation of islands hosts hundreds of different languages, six recognised religions (differentiating Christianity into Catholicism and Protestantism) and many different ethnicities. Indonesian, a form of Malay, is the official language. Java, with just 7% of the landmass, is home to 60% of Indonesia’s 260 million inhabitants. In 1945 Indonesia declared its independence from the Dutch:

‘We the people of Indonesia, hereby declare the independence of Indonesia. Matters relating to the transfer of power etc. will be executed carefully and as soon as possible.
Indonesia has been working on that ‘etc.’ ever since.’

For just over 12 months, Elizabeth Pisani travelled around Indonesia where her fluency in Indonesian and willingness to take part in the lives of people she visited and stayed with stood her in good stead. Her curiosity and capacity to fit in, to accept difference and to observe what is going on around her makes this book particularly enjoyable. There’s information about family and clan, about the importance of gifting, obligation and food, cultural and religious observance. There’s also a wealth of information about the effects of politics of democracy and decentralisation. And observations like this:

‘Two-thirds of households in Savu don’t even make it to Prosperity Level I, the lowest of Indonesia’s four wealth classifications; they are, in the government’s delicious phrase, ‘pre-prosperous’.’

I enjoyed reading this book, about learning of parts of Indonesia in addition to Jakarta and Bali. It’s an energetic democracy, with many challenges - and opportunities - ahead. Confusing and contradictory, memorable and vibrant.

Chrisl says

12/31/2017

The New York Times recently published an article that reminded me about this book. An echo of climate change thousands of years ago.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/31/science/indonesia-dewey-number.html>...

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A cataloger's challenge : Indonesia, Etc. has Library of Congress Dewey number being overruled by local library.

Book = LC 915.98

1. Indonesia--Description and travel.
2. Pisani, Elizabeth--Travel--Indonesia.
3. Indonesia--Social life and customs.
4. Indonesia--Social conditions.

Regional Library = 915.98

Local Library = 958.8

Guessing local library changed from geography shelving to history shelves to keep book in use longer as history rather than travel guide. When you only have a few books about a country or region, it might be more useful to shelf-readers to keep them in a cluster. The 915s tend to be paperback, while the history section has more hard covered.

I'm enjoying this one ... Pisani "I began to feel that the country was one giant Bad Boyfriend ... With Bad Boyfriends you know full well it will all end in tears, and yet you keep coming back for more ... you always want other people to admire this wild and exotic beast, to wish they knew him better."

(While reading this, I'm also visualizing the lush plains and river valleys of Sunda, the civilization there before being submerged by the 300 foot rise in ocean level as Great Ice finished melting 8000 years ago.)

Nanette says

It is only fitting that I finished reading Indonesia, Etc. on Indonesia's independence day on August 17. It is a truly enjoyable book; a book where I learn more about Indonesia than from 15 years of living there. Not at all surprising considering the sheer size of the country. It has 13,667 islands, almost each of them has its own local culture. Also, there is no reason for a middle class to go out of their way to take a 5-day Pelni ferry ride to a remote island under a tarp, sleeping like sardines with hundreds other passengers, sometimes even with goats and pigs, with dangdut karaoke blaring 24/7 for entertainment, like Pisani did.

Pisani tries her best in explaining the ties that bind the string of islands into one nation. She repeatedly mentions, “Patronage is the price of unity”, almost condoning the practice of corruption. I did not see how. After reading this book though, now I understand why this milder version of corruption is so prevalent in Indonesia, and how it actually helps to distribute wealth to the average Indonesian.

Her writing is poignant yet funny. Consider these paragraphs on the ethnic war in Kalimantan:

“ ‘I’d be on my way home from class and these guys, boys I knew, would be walking along the road swinging people’s heads in their hands. Their favourite thing was to tie two heads together by the hair and throw them up over an electricity wire, so that they would swing there like a pair of shoes tied together by the laces.’

‘If you looked scared, it got worse,’ she went on. ‘A teenager would yell: “Hey you! Catch!” and they’d throw a severed hand at you. They seemed to find it really funny. It was horrible.’ “

Pisani’s point of view is also unique since she provides a comparison of Indonesia 20 years ago and Indonesia at the present day. At one point, she writes:

“In a Medan newspaper I read as I travelled to Aceh for the first time in over two decades, I saw a photo of the Javanese general Soenarko – one of the Indonesian army commanders who had done most to crush the rebels in Aceh – embracing Muzakir Manaf, the former guerilla commander of GAM. Muzakir was now running for vice governor of Aceh, alongside another former rebel. Soenarko was supporting their ticket. That really did my head in; it’s like a senior Israeli general becoming campaign manager for Hezbollah.”

I truly enjoyed reading each of the book’s 384 pages. I wonder if anyone who has yet to spend a significant time in Indonesia will feel the same way, though. Consider the following description about the music dangdut (which I personally despise with passion, by the way): “People, mostly men, started dancing that bent-kneed, bum-jutting, twirly wristed dance that goes so well with dangdut music. Dangdut is an Indonesian pop music which combines vaguely Indian melodies with the dang-dut dang-dut beat of conical gendang drums, a sort of Bollywood-House music mash-up.” My boyfriend who’s American would have been lost at ‘bent-kneed’. Bent-kneed?? What?

My only gripe about the book is that Pisani does not structure this book based on themes, but rather based on the route she visited. That is perfectly acceptable as a travel book, but this book is a lot more than a mere travel book. It is a commentary, it is also a history book, filled with very astute observations about the psychology, feelings, and quirkiness of one of the most diverse countries in the world that nobody knew about. I wished she had structured this book based on themes, as she touches on so many insightful topics: corruption, the 1965 genocide, racism, deforestation, religious extremism, etc.

Pisani has easily cemented herself as one of my favorite writers, and I felt sad when I reached the last page of Indonesia, Etc. No worries, now I am on to her next book: The Wisdom of Whores.

Jake Goretzki says

Hmmm. Look, this is decent and as far as I can tell the best primer on Indonesia in the mainstream today in English. It’s full of rich observation from an experienced observer and is interwoven with pithy, insightful asides on recent history, politics, literature, society, etc.

I did, however, find it slow going and just a little frustrating.

The main problem is its structure. It's built upon a slow moving journey or series of stages across Indonesia's gazillion islands, stopping at different regions and cities, urban and extreme rural. If you're in it for the factual stuff and not there for an ambient travel read though, this is a little too meandering and oh-bloody-hell-where-are-we-now. I found myself thinking: okay, great - here's a village in the middle of nowhere; I get that it reveals the diversity of the place, but it tells me as much about Indonesia (urban par excellence, right) as a cheese rolling competition tells me about England (as in: it's cute and it's different, but that's about it).

In fact, it reminded me of travel documentaries on TV ('Next up: I'll be talking to the villagers who have farmed oysters for over a thousand years; first though: rooftop cocktails in the CBD'). The content is all there – I just wish it'd been ordered around bigger themes ('society', 'religion', etc, perhaps).

My other quarrel is the slightly wide-eyed, loved-up, backpacker note to a lot of the commentary – especially in the rural areas. It's probably just me, but I get quite wound up when every nth villager (especially the elderly) seems to be adorably maternal and smile with a 'twinkle' (I never went to Russia when it was the USSR, but this portrayal reminded a lot of the way wet-behind-the-ears Westerners would come back talking of their Moscow landladies as sweet, apple-cheeked, Pushkin-reciting saints – rather than the backpack-rifling mercenaries they generally were).

And backpacker too, conversely, because she makes so very little of the astonishingly taxing trips she takes in the book and – I suspect – plays down the bemusement of the locals and what surely must have required quite a lot of 'set up'. (Planting crops, making cakes or weaving baskets with rural locals – really? Really? Don't tell me they wouldn't laugh any outsider off or insist they sit down as a) you are our guest and b) you are going to be crap at this).

So, likeable, readable, recommendable fare – but 'less backpack, more backbone' might have made for a stronger book.

Marijke says

A gripping, entertaining and endlessly surprising book, written with wit and passion. Elizabeth Pisani is well-qualified to write the book, having worked for years in Indonesia by turns as a journalist and a medical researcher. She writes in an intelligent, observant style, well-informed by history and research. She doesn't descend into the faux-conversational confessional style of the modern travel book. This isn't really a travel book, it's actually a dissection and analysis of modern Indonesia, but much more fun than it sounds. I will definitely read it again, partly for the sheer enjoyment of her language and astonishment at her adventurous spirit - she seems to be up for almost any situation she waltzes into. The book leaves out Jakarta - it concentrates on the more rural and far-flung places, and this is not necessarily clear from the title. So as long as that doesn't disappoint you, you won't regret buying this one. I would agree with the endorsement on the back cover that says you don't have to particularly interested in Indonesia to enjoy it.

Grady McCallie says

This is a wonderful book, extraordinary in a couple ways. First, Pisani's research took her, often traveling

solo, all over Indonesia, to remote islands and villages, staying with friendly strangers she met along the way. That takes guts and a remarkable openness to whatever experiences fate sent her way. Second, her account of her travels is anything but a raw or unfiltered account - her writing sparkles with straightforward intelligence and a winning humility. The great stories and interesting people she meets are there, but in every case, Pisani uses concrete incidents or observations as a springboard for discussions of social structure, demographics, customs, recent history, or the strains that globalization and modernity are placing on different parts of Indonesia. She has a rare gift for showing how personal details reflect larger trends and patterns, as well as local and national histories.

My reason for reading the book was the realization last summer that, although Indonesia is the world's fourth largest country (right after the US), and home to the largest Muslim population in the world, I knew virtually nothing about it. I started this book after reading Tim Hannigan's *A Brief History of Indonesia*. The two are good complements - Hannigan covers the long sweep of the archipelago's history, but has a heavier focus on Java and Sumatra; Pisani really goes off the beaten track to give a sense of the incredible cultural and economic diversity of the country today. It's also worth reading *Indonesia, Etc*, with Google Earth ready to hand - Pisani identifies locations precisely, making it easy to follow along and look at pictures of the landscapes she describes.
