



Growing up in Flores

The first of our 'real people of Flores' series features Megah Bintaranny-Brownlie.

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At the heart and soul of the idyllic island life on Flores, are its beautiful, smiling people. With so many stories to tell, we thought it was time to get to know the locals, and bring you our first in a series of 'real people of Flores' interviews. First up, we welcome Megah, who was born and raised in Flores, and who now divides her time between her homes in Bali and Flores.

Megah's mother is Chinese-Indonesian and her father was a Balinese policeman. When stationed in Flores it was expected that they would live in the police compound, but instead of shutting his family away behind police gates, he moved them into the community. He wanted his family to immerse themselves in the island culture, to become a part of the local community and experience all that life in Flores has to offer. Megah describes her parents as liberal-minded and progressive, encouraging their children to learn voraciously, soak up their surroundings, and read everything they could get their hands on. She remembers very early on in her childhood walking up to four kilometres home from school most days so that she could spend her bus money on books to read, instead of bus fare.

Megah and her siblings grew up with the kind of freedom that many children can only dream about. They spent hours playing and exploring outside, roaming the island paradise with their friends, making their own fun and adventures. Locals had warned the kids about crocodiles in the lakes and beaches, but this never stopped Megah and her friends from playing in the water, and luckily she never once saw a crocodile. But the story of the crocodile lurking in the lake to eat unsuspecting swimmers was part of the local folklore, and she wonders now whether it was told (without success!) just to keep young children out of the water.

Traditionally the people of Flores farmed and ate cassava instead of rice, however Megah recalls that during the change in government a new 'lifestyle choice' was encouraged, replacing cassava with rice. Today rice is widely grown in Flores, providing for local consumption with enough leftover to



ship to Indonesia to help fill the rice deficit, reducing the need for Indonesia to import rice.

Megah's parents were both hard workers, and they instilled this work ethic in their children. Megah and her siblings all went on to university, where her sister studied marketing and her brother studied medicine. Megah spent several years at university in Jogjakarta, then a further two years in Germany studying, and is now splitting her time between Flores and Bali while she studies law.

Nowadays, when she's not studying, you can find Megah tending to her beehives and she attributes her love for the environment to her upbringing in Flores. She is committed to protecting it for future generations to enjoy, and welcomes the chance to show visitors to the region just how spectacular the islands of Flores are. While the growing tourism industry in Flores will bring the challenges of an increased population and potential for pollution, Megah believes that by taking steps now to manage these risks, the environment can be protected before any damage is done. In fact she sees tourism as a way to showcase what is at stake, and why it's worth fighting to preserve a pristine environment.

It's time to throw away the old misconceptions about Flores, as the idea that the land is dry, or people poverty-stricken, or just too much trouble to visit, couldn't be more wrong. In fact Flores is lush, with a stunning coastline that provides trade for fisherman, and dense jungles and inland waterfalls that give water and fertile soil for farming. The unspoiled wonder of the landscape, once hidden from tourists, is now being carefully

managed to allow the rest of the world to experience its rare beauty.

The main port of Flores is located in Labuan Bajo, and the government has been focussed on building the infrastructure needed here to support further growth in the region. But Flores has so much more to discover beyond these well-known tourist spots like Labuan Bajo or Komodo. Megah says visitors should also venture out to Ende and Maumere, as the older cities with their already established infrastructure have a rich history to share. I also asked Megah for her top tips on the must-see places to visit in Flores, and after a little deliberating she decided on the three coloured lakes of Kelimutu, Komodo Island and National Park, and Lembata.

Lembata is a village where the very old tradition of whale hunting started. While whale hunting may sound at odds with our ideas about ocean conservation today, Megah explained it's not whale hunting as we know it. The locals revere the ocean as a life and food source, and limit their catch to one whale only per season. They use every last piece of the whale to feed the whole village, and then use the bones of the whale for construction around the village. It is a custom that has been carried out for generations and while today whale hunting is largely frowned upon, Megah feels it is important to understand the importance behind this tradition and the value the villagers place on the whale. It is not about exploiting the ocean, but rather they celebrate the whale and the ocean it came from, treating it with the utmost respect, as a life source



that brings the village together, helping them to grow and thrive.

In a recent blog we discussed how important it is when you travel, to not only appreciate the stunning landscape and beautiful people in an area, but to also take the time to honour their heritage and culture. I had so many more questions for Megah about her life growing up in Flores, but I didn't want to scare her off before I asked for another interview! I really appreciate Megah taking time out from her bees, and her law studies, to come and answer some of my many questions. My sincerest thanks to her once more, and I look forward to chatting with her again soon.