

Extract #4

Small Eye

Wanderings with and without a camera

“Photography, once a noble art, has become,
thanks to the move to digital, a mental illness”

– Nigel Farndale

I bought my first camera, a Kodak Instamatic, in 1973. I was eighteen and about to go travelling in South-East Asia, and the hippie trail was so fresh there wasn't even a *Lonely Planet* guide. We 'travellers' took care to distinguish ourselves from the 'tourists' we so despised: staying in lodgings with as few western facilities as possible, cultivating a blasé attitude towards ailments such as debilitating and explosive diarrhoea. We travelled light, scorning big flashy cameras, and made sure not to take many photographs. We were Being Here Now. I suppose this is why I got the Instamatic: it was so little and lightweight as to be almost a joke. Or maybe it was just cheap. Or maybe my dad gave it to me; I can't remember. There are biggish chunks of the 1970s I can't remember.

I went first to Bali, for a few weeks, and then to Jogjakarta in Central Java where I stayed for two or three months before moving on to Malaysia and Thailand. In the course of the whole trip I took forty, maybe fifty, photographs. When I look now at the few photos I have, I am delighted by the fragments of the past – those 'Kodak moments' – I captured. Look: there's me, willow slender, standing by the side of the road in Bali; that road is now a traffic sewer, but in '73 there's nothing but rice fields and coconut palms and a smiling hippie chick in a delicate dress.

A vivid aide to the memory, this handful of photos – but I remember just as well many things I did *not* take pictures of. I was a suburban girl from Melbourne who had never even glimpsed real poverty. To have plonked myself in the centre of one of the most densely populated islands on earth (Java, two-thirds the size of Victoria, had a population then close to a hundred million) was to invite genuine culture shock. Daily encounters were things startlingly unfamiliar ensured that they would be engraved permanently in my mind's eye. Some were magically lovely, like the glass jars filled with fireflies that, for a few coins, the neighbourhood kids used to light the way through the dark streets to the local food stall where we ate most nights. In the vivid image of the pumping calves of a bicycle driver ferrying me up the steep hill out of town I see my dawning awareness of how bloody hard most people in the world have to work just to survive.

I have a digital camera these days; my son and I bought identical models in New York four years ago. He seldom bothers to use his now: so much easier with his iPhone, where he can cute-ify the pictures with various apps and upload seamlessly to the web or cloud location of his choice. (I ask him if I should get a smart phone; he says firmly, “No, Mum. It'll just drive you insane.”) And I don't use my handy little digital camera (about the size of that Instamatic) much either, still preferring to just... look.

An increasingly strange and old-fashioned preference, it seems.

From the essay 'Small Eye' by Kate Veitch