

Siddharlo's Guest House

I gave up on a plan to reinvent myself back in the States, and no stable place to relocate. So I focused on the present time and place — life in “the Bud.”

Renting out guest accommodation had become a popular way, for foreigners especially, to earn extra income. This is the kind of place I first rented, and the idea appealed to me. With Wayan's help, I began to search for a suitable place where I could create my own guest house. Soon enough, I found a two-story bungalow that I could rent for one year.

Armed with a new sense of purpose and proper visa, I named my new place in honor of *Siddhartha*, by Herman Hesse. In June of 2012, I hung out a new sign under the Bali sun: Siddharlo's Guest House. “Camp Paradise” was closed, and my first guest was soon due to arrive.

Siddharlo's Guest House was more like a fifth dimensional train station for aliens than an inn for travelers. It was located about 10 minutes by motorbike from Ubud's spiritual, arts, and trinket center. My villa was easier to find than most, past the only resort with a big swimming pool and down a well-paved driveway. The drive from town to my villa was an adventure in itself. The road, with all its twists and turns, was bordered on either side by a wide array of visual imagery: rice fields, villas under construction, ancient Hindu temples, botanical gardens, and an authentic *Kundalini* yoga ashram. In addition, driving along the narrow, congested road was like navigating an obstacle course of dogs and more dogs, ducks, cars, motorbikes, and people.

I had sometimes dreamed about having a resort or a guest house business and thought that people who owned these types of places really had it made. It was a way to sustain yourself while doing something you enjoyed, with the possibility of even making a little extra. Ideally, I would have chosen to go eco-friendly with a totally self-sustainable dwelling, operating off the grid using solar power, rainwater, and recycled gray water, which would leave only a minimal ecological footprint. That ideal would have to wait until I had a better understanding of the local tourist accommodation business and had accrued sufficient resources to procure my own land on which to build it. So, Siddharlo's was a practice run — the first step in self-sufficiency on the island and in moving toward realization of that dream.

I would describe the structure I chose for my new home, and guest house, as a poorly designed Indo/European style villa. It was built in the late '90s, constructed mainly of painted brick and concrete, and already showed signs of wear. The sinks, toilets, and ceramic tile were damaged and in dire need of replacement. Doors and windows did not fit or function properly in their frames, and part of the patio was sinking. In fact, the entire place needed renovation.

The disproportionate use of space in the typical Balinese home is an architectural oddity by American standards. For example, most bedrooms are quite small, while a bathroom can accommodate a king-sized bed.

The house had no living room area or office space. Fortunately, I found a villa with an unusually large indoor kitchen. Most Balinese houses have either a tiny indoor kitchen or an open kitchen located outside. The kitchen, however, consisted of a counter top, a sink with only cold running water, a refrigerator, and a camping stove powered by a tank of natural gas. I added a microwave and an electric oven.

One feature needed no fixing: the view. The spacious patio overlooked an expansive garden of coconut trees and tropical flora in a myriad of sizes, shapes and colors. In the early morning, a veil of mist lay across the garden, creating an enchanting and inspiring ambiance. Intoxicating fragrances floated gently on the jungle breeze.

Despite the villa's drawbacks, or because of them, the rent was affordable. I still had enough money to make necessary repairs and to create a pleasant retreat for guests.

The guest quarters offered a private entrance to the single spacious room that could accommodate two people comfortably. I brought in a queen-sized bed, new bamboo furniture, and Balinese art. The private, modern bath was plumbed with hot and cold running water, and equipped with shower and tub. A balcony, overlooking the garden, doubled as a kitchenette.

Along with free wifi, I also set up services including transportation, bike rentals, laundry cleaning, massage, clean drinking water, delivery of meals and organic vegetables, and tour guides.

Finally, 52 Goodfingers created a roadside sign for me, and I employed Wayan as my assistant. He would also add an entertaining touch by shimmying up the coconut trees to retrieve coconuts for my guests. I took photos of the villa, set up a website with online booking, and officially opened Siddharlo's.

After all the preparation, I remained uncertain about whether I possessed sufficient knowledge and skill to adequately meet the demands of a cross section of international travelers. How would my past business and social experiences serve me in this venture? I wanted to connect with my guests, befriend them and hear what they had to say. I wanted to use my artistic knowledge and be sensitive to my guests' creative needs. I wanted to be an unobtrusive, smiling presence and provide them a calming, harmonious environment that would enrich their experience and foster a sense of well-being; a place where they could unroll their yoga mat, have a veggie shake, sing a song or two and tell me their stories.

My fears turned out to be unfounded and I soon began hosting guests from all corners of the globe. Many of my guests were free-spirited young people who had traveled the world for years. I enjoyed the entire parade of colorful characters, and some stood out more than others.

Jaguar X arrived at my villa at the appointed time. Seeing her up close for the first time, I was taken aback by her striking presence — tall, fit, ebony skinned, beaded, braided, and broadly smiling. Topping off her image was an exaggerated crown of black braided hair full of bright pink and yellow string that seemed to ensnare moonbeams before falling from her shoulders, and draping her slender body to the waist like a cape of light. The statuesque cat woman stood in my doorway and surveyed the space.

“Aren't you going to invite me in?” JX queried through an American southern drawl, half-smile.

We couldn't have been standing there for more than a few seconds. I felt myself flush with embarrassment and checked to make sure my jaw wasn't hanging open.

“Yes, of course. Come in,” I said.

I helped her carry in luggage and several hula hoops. Her cat-paw feet seemed to barely touch the floor as she appeared to float in fluid silence to the chair I held out for her. After pouring us each a cup of tea, I joined her at the table and we began to exchange stories. JX began by telling me that she was in her late 30s, unmarried, had no children, and was self-employed.

“My mom kicked me off the couch and my brother was getting on my back,” she explained. “I have an idea for a goddess empowerment retreat.”

This was her eighth sojourn to Bali in as many years. JX continued to return because she felt certain that in Bali, among those she considered to be of highly evolved consciousness, she could develop her hoop tribe. JX had already sold many retreat tickets, had a huge following, and was a role model for the New Age entrepreneur.

JX took a sip of her tea and continued. “I consider myself part of the Hoop Love Tribe.”

“Can you tell me what you mean by the Hoop Love Tribe?” I asked.

JX paused for a moment as though collecting her thoughts. I suspected that she'd never been asked to explain it before. Perhaps she searched for an explanation that a non goddess could understand.

“The Hoop Love Tribe is at one with universal goddess energy. The body of the goddess is translucent, pulsating with complex systems of glowing energy that is visible to those who have *the sight*; or what you might call a clairvoyant. She is not a person, but pure awareness. To be a goddess is about the integration of body, mind, and spirit into a single spectrum of light and consciousness.”

JX sat back in her chair and twisted a long strand of her hair into a knot. Three of her long fingers were adorned with onyx stone rings embedded in silver. I sensed that she placed some significance on the rings, other than feminine adornment. Searching my memory for symbolism that might reveal the rings' secrets, I recalled that onyx was believed to have the power to align its wearer with higher consciousness, facilitate wise judgment, deflect grief, and repel the negative vibrations of others. Silver was considered a mirror of the soul, a conduit connecting the physical and astral bodies, thus enhancing intuition, and was akin to the moon and feminine energy. The number three was harmony and balance; a synthesis of opposing forces. I was feeling a little hip having remembered that bit of trivia.

She caught me eyeing a satchel.

“I see that you're curious about what's in my luggage,” JX said.

“Yes, I suppose I was,” I replied. I felt somewhat nosy.

As JX removed a set of bronze bowls from her satchel, she told me that they were Tibetan singing bowls. She actually traveled to Tibet to purchase them. As JX was arranging the bowls, I noticed in her open bag what appeared to be a deck of cards bearing an intricate etching of an angel, several books, and a small silk pouch tied with a golden string. Apparently detecting my interest she told me that if I was in need of divine guidance, she could give me an Angel Card reading. JX went on to say that she also had the ability to read love auras and how that might be helpful if I was seeking romance or having trouble with relationships.

“And what does a thing like that cost?” I asked. I tried to maintain a respectful level of composure, but when she told me her fees, I couldn't help but react.

“Do you realize that that is enough to provide for a family of four for a month here?” I asked. I was thinking of Wayan and how hard he worked to earn less money in a month than what JX charged for a 45-minute session of reading one's “love aura,” whatever the heck that was.

I became somewhat concerned about what I might have gotten myself into financially.

As though reading my mind, JX said with a soft smile, “There is no charge for a healing session with the bowls, but I do appreciate a small donation.”

JX directed me to lie face down on my bed and relax, then proceeded to explain how the bowls worked by resonating with the body's seven *chakras*.

Having once been a student and practitioner of yoga and meditation techniques that were rooted in Eastern tradition, I knew about *chakras* and understood their significance in healing and spiritual practices. I also knew that they actually have a basis in early anatomy, corresponding with the five major complexes of nerves along the spinal column and the two major parts of the brain, associated with lower and higher functioning. I didn't know a great deal about the singing bowls, other than that their use as musical instruments dated back to Tibetan monasteries around the 8th Century AD, where they were used to begin and end daily meditations. I had heard them on relaxation discs and found the deep resonance produced by the bowls to be very soothing.

As JX placed a bowl at each *chakra* point, she explained how each resonated in a certain key, or harmonic tone, that corresponded with the natural frequency of the associated *chakra*.

"The bowls have the ability to detect the source or location in the body where there is illness or injury because there is a blockage of the energy flow through the *chakra* associated with that function or part of the body. The blockage causes an audible modification in tone of the bowl's vibration." JX went on to explain that a recording is done of the session because it is a more reliable way of discerning subtle dissonance than trying to gauge by ear alone.

"Once the problem area is isolated, more emphasis can be placed on that *chakra*," JX said, as she described how the bowls also had the ability to unblock the flow of energy, because they seek to self-correct any dissonance in their tonal quality.

For the next 30 minutes or so, JX moved around and across my body, striking each bowl in turn, allowing the vibrations of the bowls to resonate into and throughout my body. JX remarked that my heart was very strong; one of the strongest she'd heard, but advised that the bowls had detected blockages in my lower three *chakras*. JX instructed me to remain very still, keeping my eyes closed and my mind empty of thought, in order to allow the bowls to work. JX added that the residual vibrations would continue to move through the body with healing energy for several minutes following the last strike of the bowls. I expected the energy would stay, circulate the *chakras*, for as long as needed, but I suppose it depended on the healer.

When I opened my eyes a short while later, I felt very relaxed, but it quickly became clear that there had been no substantial improvement in my physical symptoms. When I turned to ask her if more sessions would be required, I realized that JX had vanished into the other room, as though fading into the trees on an afternoon breeze, along with the vibrations of her bowls.

I wasn't upset, or even especially surprised, that my Bali belly still held me captive. Maybe I was a bad patient? What I got was another in a sequence of strange afternoons on what I'd come to laughingly refer to as "Fantasy Island." The outcome was too bad as there are true healers among us, but they tend to not charge an arm and a leg being aware of Spirit.

I wished her well.

JX's retreat turned out to be one of the most successful on Bali.

My next guest, "the doctor," was a first time visitor to the island. The middle-aged man's stocky build, rosy cheeks, and big, bushy eyebrows reminded me of Grumpy the dwarf in *Snow White*. I chuckled to myself as I pictured him lumbering through the airport toting an ax instead of a single suitcase. His large, square face was accented by thick, black rimmed glasses that gave him a stern and scholarly appearance. I asked about his flight and if he was experiencing any jet lag.

“No...no jet lag,” he said, as he brushed his short, stiff brown hair off of his perspiring forehead, “and I take special herbs to combat motion fatigue.”

On the drive from the airport, I learned that he had been a practicing physician in his native Russia before emigrating to the United States a decade ago. He had arrived in New York with only \$20 USD to his name. He later relocated, settling in Los Angeles, where he established and operated a clinic as an acupuncturist, herbalist and holistic healer. I asked what had brought him to Bali, to which he replied in his heavy accent, "I was curious what all the hype regarding healing on Bali was all about and wanted to find out for myself."

Once we arrived back at my villa, the doctor set about inspecting his room with such attention to detail that I was tempted to ask him if he'd like a magnifying glass. He bounced on the sofa, opened and closed the refrigerator, checked the water pressure and looked into, under and behind every nook and cranny, all the while making grunts, hurumphs, hmmmms and nods of acceptability or disapproval. He seemed to find everything in order. Well, most everything. He stood staring at the bed and rubbing his chin as if it had just spoken to him, then asked if I had two wires. When I asked what he needed the wires for, he told me that he practiced the art of dowsing, as well as teaching it to others, thus adding to his ever increasing resume of professed skills and talents. Dowsing, more commonly known as "divination" and best known as a method of locating underground water, is also employed for the purpose of locating metals, ore, oil and even grave sites. What the doctor was looking for just now were signs of problematic energy flow.

I provided the wires as requested and watched as he bent them together and passed them over, under and around the bed. When he'd completed the ritual he announced that there were several veins of negative energy in that area and was insistent that the bed be moved to another part of the room. I was determined to build a reputation for excellent hospitality and do whatever I could to assure the comfort and well-being of my guests, even if it meant going the extra mile, a philosophy that the doctor would put to the test over the next few weeks. Although I could see no real necessity in doing so, I acquiesced to his demands and moved the bed to a location more to his liking.

I asked him if there was anything else I could do for him, before turning in. He advised me that he was a vegetarian, and asked if I could arrange delivery of fresh vegetables in the morning. "Did you know that before the collapse of communism in Russia, it was illegal to be a vegetarian?" he asked. "If you were discovered, you could actually be sent to prison." He went on to say that he had helped to create the first vegetarian union group in Russia.

I thought it was a pretty radical idea and considered what possible reason the Russian government could have for meddling in the dietary proclivities of its populace. It was one of those profound moments of clarity in which I recognized how much I took for granted and was thankful I'd been spared many of the unpleasant circumstances that life had to offer.

“No I didn't know that. It is hard to even imagine,” I told him. I promised to see to the vegetable delivery and bade him goodnight.

I had heard that following the collapse of the former Soviet Union, a sizable number of Russia's wealthy had relocated to Bali and invested large sums of money in property and business ventures and established their own expat community. They reportedly lived in close proximity to one another, set up their own websites and were pretty much self-contained, choosing not to mingle with other communities, whether foreign or native. I hadn't had any personal experience thus far.

My knowledge of communist Russia, too, was very limited and over the next few weeks I listened with interest as the doctor shared many stories of his life before the collapse of the USSR and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Stories lavishly seasoned with boastful accounts of his own accomplishments and heroics that would have you believing that he could deliver a baby with one hand tied behind his back, diagnose some rare, obscure illness by reading tea leaves and "leap tall buildings in a single bound."

I asked him if the movie, "Dr. Zhivago," was realistic in its portrayal of the hardships endured during the revolution.

He thought about it for a moment before replying, "Some of it was true. You could wake up to find that a village of peasants had moved into your house."

I nicknamed him "Dr. Zhivago" after that, which seemed to please him.

His petulance was only equaled by his miserliness. On his first morning as my guest, he presented me with a list of his expectations. Although it was posted clearly on the booking website what amenities were and were not included, he apparently chose to ignore it and leaned on me to act as his tour guide, transportation manager and dating service, all at no extra cost. As if that wasn't presumptuous enough, he acted as though my kitchen was his own personal internet cafe, using my computer of course. The doctor grumbled and complained about the cost of everything, from a motor bike ride to an article of clothing and haggled with the local merchants over even a few cents more than what he thought he should pay for an item or service, frequently comparing Bali with India and saying how much cheaper things were there. His attitude about money seemed odd to me for a man who had lived behind the Iron Curtain and who, even now, lived in subsidized housing that he described as an apartment the size of a shoebox.

Apart from the many temple visits the doctor made on his daily outings, he was most interested in meeting with an authentic Balinese healer, more out of curiosity than need. During his stay, he connected with a fellow Russian on Facebook who was able to book a session with a healer through a Russian-owned hotel. Upon returning from the day's session, he told me how the healer had done a "body reading" and raved about having had the best massage he'd ever experienced. He didn't disclose what, if any, diagnosis and recommendations were made, but overall it had been a wonderful experience...except for paying the bill. He was upset and confused by what he considered an exorbitant price tag, having been under the impression that true healers offer their services requesting only donations as payment. He had apparently asked the healer about it, who responded that he was unaware of what was being charged by the hotel for providing that service.

When he wasn't out visiting temples and healers, taking in the sights or complaining about one thing or another, he was shopping for a wife and offering unsolicited medical services. His practice seemed to cover everything from hypnosis and past life regression therapy to dietary analysis and marriage counseling. No one was safe from diagnosis and treatment. One day Wayan was confronted with the pronouncement that he would not live past the age of 40 due to complications from smoking cigarettes. His treatment plan for Wayan involved a session of hypnosis and acupuncture. Wayan was trying to be a good sport about it, but when he saw the box full of small needles, he was having none of it. He mumbled something about black magic and found an excuse to make a fast retreat. The doctor's attention then focused on Wayan's wife, who he diagnosed with marital insecurities and prescribed several hours of mental dowsing. Finally, he addressed my chronic stomach problems, naming improper diet as the culprit, once snatching a bag of chips from my hand to make his point. I had to laugh when he read the ingredients label and realized that the organic chips contained none of the offensive contents he

was expecting. Nevertheless, he prescribed numerous herbs and nutritional supplements, many of which would be unavailable anywhere on the island.

After 22 days, it came time for the doctor to return home. As he prepared for his departure, I asked him what he thought of Bali. He said that he loved the Balinese temples and was very impressed with the unique spirituality and architecture of the indigenous people, but the pseudo-spiritual healing businesses that targeted the tourist dollar and were run predominantly by Western immigrants, he viewed with disdain.

"If I wanted to deal with the trendy and pretentious New Age scene and holistic medicine with an overinflated price tag, I wouldn't need to come to Bali. There's plenty of that in L.A."

I asked him if he would return to the island. He laughed and said, "You never know." We took pictures together, shook hands and wished each other health, love and clarity.

"Good luck with the wife search," I bid him farewell.

Siddharlo's fifth dimensional train station in its first year of business accommodated more than 15 guests. Nazareno and Lisa were two of my youngest guests, gone from dawn to dusk, and I enjoyed "their paradise is where I am" attitude. Both turned 30 years old in "the Bud" and had been backpacking Asia since they were 20. He was from Uruguay and she, Sweden. Both were yoga teachers. Marriage was a discussion point but not planned in their immediate future. Luckily for them a local yoga shop contracted them to lead a "couples' yoga," but unfortunately the customers were few and far between, mostly due to the fact that Ubud was saturated with yoga instructors. Thus, I was constantly asked to lower their rent, and it beckoned the question, how they managed financially?

It was unusual for me to meet young people who globe trotted the world in the name of spirituality. Most people of their generation only wanted money. The two vegetarians wanted harmony and balance for the mind and body, not a mortgage and a fancy car. They were poster material with Lisa's yoga perfect figure, bright Swedish blonde hair, turquoise colored eyes and a sun healthy, freckled face. She was mature beyond her years and it gave her a magnetic attraction I found to be radiantly alive. Nazareno was the guy I always wanted to be. He loved life with a bungee jumper's conviction. His yoga and PADI certified body was chiselled: stomach muscles and metal pipe arms sporting beach burned tattoos. On top of his outdoorsman body was a strikingly handsome face that caused the local maids to giggle. Yet, he was so utterly unpretentious and comfortable with himself that his aura and smile pulled you in with an infectious likeability. No people, I thought, could be this happy and content. How to obtain such inner peace?

I was horribly jealous and regretted why I had not shaved my head and become a Zen monk when I was their age. That way I could have voluntarily absolved myself from my worldly possessions rather than being robbed of them. *Should've, could've* and *what ifs* twisted my thoughts into a pretzel of senseless clouded exasperation.

"I am sorry to see you go," I said.

"We really like it here, but a friend is willing to take us in for practically nothing. I hope you understand," Lisa explained.

"Would you like to try the yellow coconut water?" I asked them. "The water inside them is considered sacred and used for ceremonial purposes. I was also told the water cleansed the intestines."

“I would love to try it,” Lisa answered in plain English as if she had lived her entire life in Minnesota.

Wayan shimmied up a tree and cut down six coconuts. He then carefully took a hatchet and cut the top off. We poured the refreshing coconut water into three glasses.

“That’s really good.” Nazareno’s eyebrows lifted as he emptied his glass.

“There’s plenty more, so help yourselves.” I made a toast. “Here’s to your 10 years traveling on the dharma triangle: India, Thailand and Bali.”

Lisa and Nazareno both raised their glasses in a toast.

“How are your yoga classes going?” I queried.

“Slow...” Nazareno answered.

“Do you know how to design a web site?” Lisa asked.

“Yes, I can help you with that,” I offered. “Are you looking to promote yourself?”

“We were thinking of our own studio. Not sure where or how yet, but that is our direction,” Nazareno explained, in his Spanish tinged accent.

“Nazareno, I have been curious about one thing. How have you managed to live so long abroad? Do you get money from your parents?” I asked, respectfully.

“My parents have no money, amigo,” he laughed. “One time I worked for a year at a car rental agency in Amsterdam and saved.”

Lisa showed no interest in the question. I calculated that working one year at a car rental company could not cover the next nine years abroad, even for backpacking. Plane fare and passport visas cost money. If they didn’t want to tell me how they managed it, I didn’t press the question. Most foreigners I met on Bali pretended to be poor so the vague response came as no surprise.

“I hope you write a book about your journey. My 22-year-old daughter will be your first reader.” I shook his hand. “Thank you for making Siddharlo’s your home. Please tell your friends about me.”

They zipped up their packs. Nazareno pushed a pair of complimentary yoga class passes into my hand. “Stop by, amigo.”

“The month is already gone,” I said, and hugged Lisa.

“I’d like you to have these as a token of our gratitude for your hospitality,” Lisa said, and handed me two yoga mats. “We’ll come back and say hi.”

I was sorry to see them go...but they all come and go. Being transcendental was part of their nature.

To order the entire memoir visit <http://www.arlohenning.com/Bali.htm>