

I'll begin at the end: Rachel gets all of the points for this outing. The points are made up, and I make them up whenever I like, and I distribute them as I please to people who make fabulous things come about. She's an amazing person for a lot of reasons, but when I hopped off a plane in Jakarta on the island of Java and hopped on another plane to Labuan Bajo on the island of Flores (yes, it's a Portuguese name), it was as if Rachel had created an entirely different planet and taken us to a whole new world, like walking into the wardrobe in C. S. Lewis' most famous work. 'Labuan' means 'harbor' in Malay, and 'Bajo' means 'down' in Portuguese and 'dragon' in several nearby languages. The mix of languages provides a good introduction to the history of the place. And here is the view from our hostel on the hill overlooking the harbor at Labuan Bajo. Rachel gets all of the points.



The 'us' I referred to included Amy. Amy is one of Rachel's friends, and we had been passing each other on planes for a number of years before Rachel finally arranged an intersection. Amy's a fun one, and a decent human being, and I'm now friends with Amy, too. But that's not important right now. An iridescent blue spider is always the most important piece of the immediate context. I took this picture after we'd been out and about for a couple of days (the whole trip was only a four-day weekend), and Amy asked Rachel: "What is she doing?" because I was under a table trying to get the angle I wanted on the spider, and why would any sane adult female be under a table contorting herself in a variety of directions? Rachel: "She must've found a bug." Rachel and I have been friends for over a quarter of a century. She knows.





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And another bug, on flowers down some of the many stairs on the way to and from the hostel on the hill.



Unfortunately, the Flores planet is not perfect. This is some of the beach trash around Labuan Bajo. Where does all of the trash come from? It's tricky to dispose of trash in many parts of the world, so some trash happens because there's no place to put it. There were public trash cans around Labuan Bajo, something that Rachel and Amy commented on as unusual in that part of the world. In addition, a lot of countries ship trash to other countries to dispose of, but when there's nowhere to dispose of it, it doesn't get disposed of. Some of it washes up on beaches all over this part of the world, and some of it collects in 'islands' in the major oceans. The biggest one is called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. That's Amy in the blue shirt walking along the beach trash.





It was easy to keep track of the hostel. Not only was it on top of the hill, but it was up the road that was the official tsunami evacuation route. 'Jalur' is Malay and Indonesian for path, or route. The wave sneaking up on the pedestrian who has no feet (an 'estrian', as one of my students pointed out) is self-explanatory in this part of the world.



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We made it a point to watch sunsets every evening we were there.





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Finding naturalistic information about this part of the world, particularly for the less popular species, is hard to do. I'm never sure why some species are more popular than others, but I was willing to travel around the world and give Rachel all of the points for the komodo dragons, but not for the crabs. The crabs were good bonuses, though, and more interesting than might have been expected. A lot of them were on the wooden dock, and they'd come out almost onto our feet, but any motion at all made them disappear. They were fast.



I picked up a copy of *Roughing It*, by Mark Twain, at a hostel on my way out of Germany, and I read it on the way and for a couple of days while I was in Flores. It was mildewing within minutes of arriving in the tropical humidity, as I'm sure we all were, and I left the book behind for future readers in Indonesia after I left. But all of that moisture allows for a variety of other phenomena, including large cracks in concrete bathrooms and spiders who come and go depending on who's using the bathroom. This one preferred to be in the bathroom when one of the others of us were not.





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I think I was the only one of the three of us who was particularly interested in the Komodo dragons (*Varanus komodoensis*). For whatever reason, giant reptiles don't speak to less weird human females. They live on four islands in the area, including Flores (Komodo, Gili Motang, and Rinca are the others), but there are more of them in some places than in others. They can swim long distances, so there's no reason why they shouldn't be found throughout the archipelago, and maybe they used to be. The Hobongan have an oral narrative about how they killed the last dragon on Borneo. They're probably right. We did not swim a long distance to Rinca. We took a boat.



The boat was a tourist boat, so we had several stops in addition to the stop at the national park at Rinca Island for the dragons. Lots of nationalities represented, including Indonesians, but none from Flores. The boat was large, and there were options for what to watch on the way: the scenery, the other people, whatever animals were visible in the water. I spent most of the time on the boat waiting for a Dutch woman who was tanned to the point of looking like an old couch to develop skin cancer. I was sure that if I waited long enough, I could see the actual moment when skin damage turns into skin cancer. Before it did, we arrived at Padar island for a walk.





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Padar Island is small but hikable. I disembarked and went up the volcanic formations. This kind of structure is not common outside of volcanic zones. I wasn't there when it happened, but the water cut-outs in the land look like leftover calderas, as if the volcano was going off in multiple places close together, like bubbles in boiling water.



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After hiking, we had about an hour to go snorkeling. At nearly mid-day. Under the equatorial sun. I think I felt my own skin damage becoming cancer. Meanwhile, there was a school of fish hunting in a pack. They were herding a group of smaller fish into a feeding ball, similar to the way in which dolphins round up fish. I haven't heard of fish hunting in groups previously, but I watched it happen.



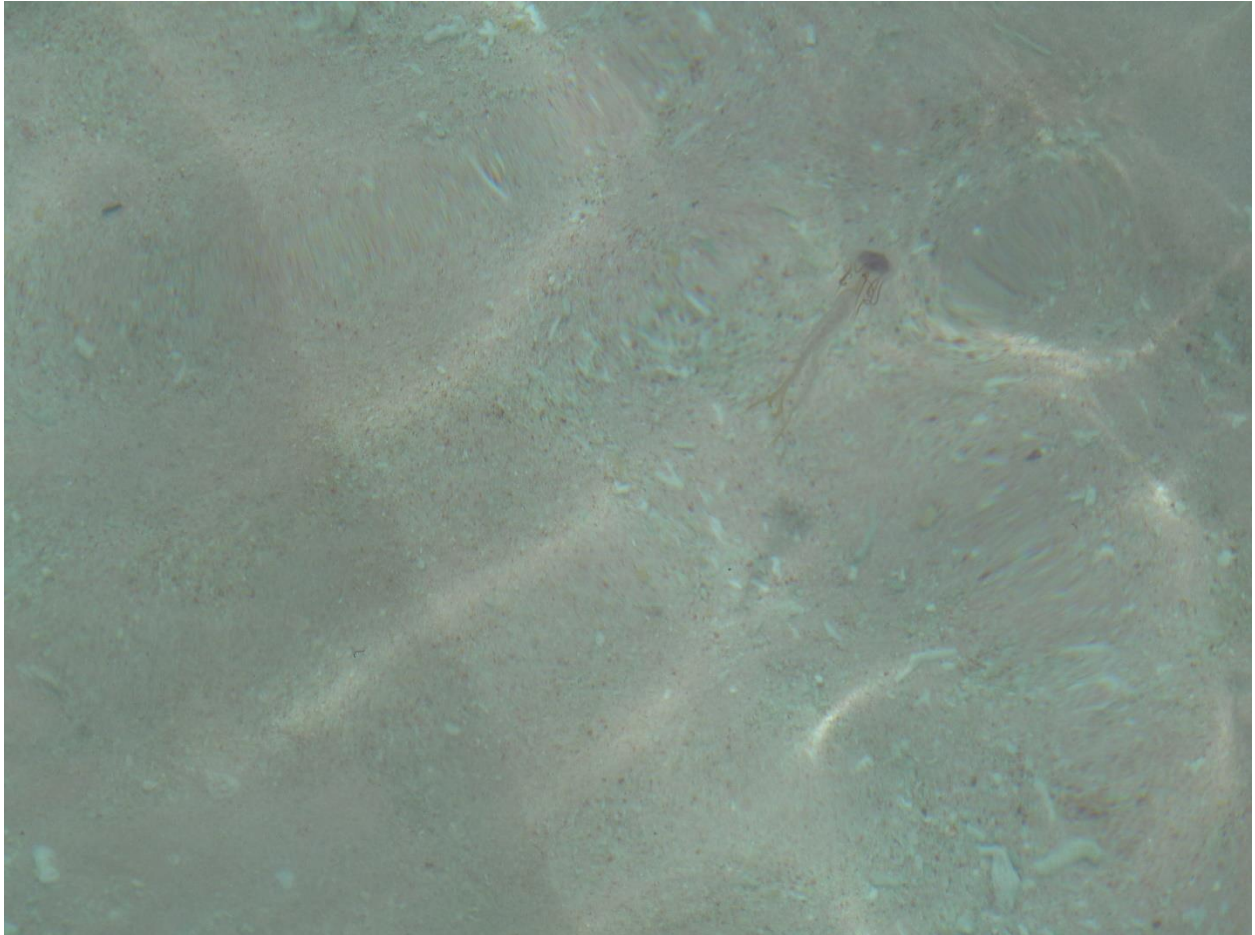


There are several pink beaches in that part of the world, and I think that the one we went to was on Komodo Island and part of the national park there. Yes, the sand is pink, made so by dead and pulverized reddish coral that washes up on the beaches in some places because of local current effects. But let's not forget the equatorial sun. Depending on the angle and time of day and other factors, the pinkness can be mostly washed out. The people driving the boat were going to skip the pink beach because the currents that bring pulverized coral were also bring jellyfish on the day we were there. But we had social 'influencers' aboard, one of whom threw a two-year-old-style fit when the possibility of not visiting the beach was floated. We went to the beach. She posed, while her male companion-photographer took pictures. The rest of us explored and tried to avoid the jellyfish and the fit-thrower.



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I was stung a few times, but not badly. The jellyfish were small, a few inches long, and apparently not so toxic.





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Then on to Rinca for the main attraction. The main attraction for me. I had already arranged with Rachel and Amy that if we failed to see the Komodo dragons on the first attempt, we would be trying again. But they both lucked out, and we saw dragons almost as soon as we were off the boat. It was a hot day. Even the reptiles were taking their time and staying in the shade.





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People are closely corralled on Rinca Island. An urban legend, or maybe modern oral history, was circulating while we were there, about a tourist who had wandered off and the only thing found later was his camera. Most people nodded as if that story made sense to them and stayed with the group. I wanted to know if the pictures on the camera were available. They were not, which is why I'm leaning toward urban legend rather than oral history.





Komodo dragons of most sizes: the smallest, newly hatched dragons live in the trees to avoid becoming food for the larger lizards, and we didn't see those. We did see many sizes of on-the-ground lizards: a couple of feet long (.6 meters) to much larger than I am: nearly 10 feet long (3+ meters) and probably close to three hundred pounds (136 kilograms). Komodo dragons are the largest lizards in the world, a kind of monitor lizard. The alligators and crocodiles are crocodilians, not lizards. It was a hot day. Gaping is a way to cool off. The lizards might also be vocalizing, but I couldn't hear the song of the Komodo.



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With predators that size roaming freely, we were all surprised at how blasé the local prey was. When I was in Kruger National Park, the zebras, birds, impalas, and anyone else who might pass for delicious had designated members of the group to look out for the predators. Not so at Rinca Island. The boars and monkeys (crab-eating macaques, aka long-tailed macaque, aka cynomolgus monkey, aka *Macaca fascicularis*) and deer would loaf in the shade along with the giant lizards who eat members of their groups on a regular basis. It's a different philosophy of how to deal with major predators. I was reading Nietzsche lately: the prey animals on Rinca Island seem to be using slave morality.





On September 29, 2019, Popular Mechanics published an article about the structures that make Komodo dragons physically tough. Komodo dragons have four types of osteoderms (boney skin, basically) under their scales. Other reptiles have usually one type of osteoderm. These lizards have four kinds of armor under their skin. Why so, asked the writer for Popular Mechanics (Daisy Hernandez), given that these are the apex predators and not hunted except by stone-age people interested in keeping their children out of the mouths of dragons? They eat each other. Not just the little ones. When food is scarce, they turn on each other, as in humans. The prey's inattentiveness facilitates the genetic diversity and population recovery of the lizards.





A Komodo dragon nest, or decoy nest. The females dig and disguise multiple nests. Komodo dragon females can reproduce sexually or asexually. If asexually (parthenogenesis), all of the offspring are male. If sexually, Komodos can form pair bonds and be monogamous, which is rare in reptiles, as in humans, although some people would like to claim or force otherwise. Courtship rituals are mostly about the males trying not to be injured by the females, as in humans. Each clutch contains about twenty eggs that are incubated in the ground for 7-8 months. The small dragons have to punch their way out of their eggs with a small horn on their snouts that soon falls off, and then they have to dig their way out of the ground, and then they have to get up a tree before one of the larger lizards eats them. No doubt, this early childhood education contributes to the dragons being metaphysically tough. But maybe they aren't. Maybe the adult dragons have long-term psychological trauma.





I doubt it. On the morning of our arrival, several of the larger dragons had pursued and killed a Timor deer (aka Javan rusa aka Sunda sambar aka *Rusa timorensis*). The red patch in the picture is what was left of the thoracic structures of the deer a few hours later. The lizards had hunted as a group. They had pursued the deer on foot and run it down. They made quick work of the entire process. This is not what I had been told about Komodo dragons. The readily available nonsense is that the dragons are slow: they wait until prey comes along, and they try to bite it. They produce some form of venom, so they then follow the prey around for a few days until the prey dies. They are basically solitary, but if there's food available within smelling or tasting distance (when the sense is on the tongue, that's taste, even when the tongue is sensing via the air?), they'll show up for the meal. They might take a slow and solitary approach, too. Most effective predators aren't particular about their methods of acquiring meat.





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More prey, being blasé: this bird was on the other side of the tree from the largest dragon we saw. This worked out well for the bird on that day because the dragon had eaten himself into a stupor and wasn't moving much. The national park employees whose job it is to keep themselves and their sticks between the tourists and the dragons didn't even bother with the biggest dragon. He was where he was going to be for probably close to a month.





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Dagon trail through the forest.





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We had a walk on Rinca Island, away from where the dragons live. I had also heard that the dragons lived on open grasslands, such as these, but they do not, if they have a choice. They prefer to stay in the well-wooded areas along the coast. Mangroves are the best, where they can go in and out of the water and among the trees and be invisible and lurk if they like or pursue and capture if they like. The national park employees stayed close when we were along the coast and amidst the trees. Out on the grasslands, we could wander around.





“Hic Sunt Dracones” is Latin for ‘here are dragons.’ The readily available information on this says that the sentence was put on old maps to indicate where monsters had been found or hypothesized, usually beyond the edges of the explored territory. With a bit more checking, it turns out that the phrase was rarely used, on old or new maps. I found probably reliable sources for one use of the phrase, on a globe made in 1510, and appropriately, the globe puts the phrase along the southeast coast of Asia, where dragons might well have lived at the time. According to readily available information, Komodo dragons were first described for the non-archipelagians in 1910 by Lieutenant Jacques Karel Henri van Steyn van Hensbroek, a Dutch colonial administrator. But what if the dragons were correctly labeled in 1510, and everyone is being fanciful about understanding the phrase instead of thinking that the sailors of 1510 might have had information that they correctly labeled?

I liked this picture because it shows the ear hole well.



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Deer in the background, dragon in the foreground. I'm sure these deer knew the guy who had been eaten that morning, but there we all were together. Maybe they were assuming that the tourists would be more delicious and provide some much-needed variety in the dragons' diets.





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My vote for dietary variety would have been a buffalo.





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Rinca, like most of the islands in the Indonesian archipelago, is volcanic. I had a few minutes to appreciate some of the streaks and mixes of minerals on the way back to the boat.





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At one place we stopped to go swimming, there were dozens of starfish all over the ground under the water. The water was deep. I never reached the starfish, which was probably a good thing, so far as the starfish were concerned. I have a history of playing with starfish, from my perspective. I'm sure from the starfish's perspective, I have a history of harassing starfish.



The next day, we decided to rent scooter bikes and see more of Flores. I'm not allowed to drive because I've never driven one, and I don't know how that's going to change unless I drive one. But I did get to be the backseat driver. After we rented the bikes, both Rachel and Amy took off the wrong way on a one-way road. Then we came around the block to be where we wanted to be, and they nearly did it again. Eventually, we ended up on the dirt road to a resort.





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It was a nice resort. I knew it was a nice resort from all of the animals we saw on the way into and out of and at the resort. We used the amenities for a good chunk of the day without paying for anything more than the drinks.



Neither Rachel nor Amy had encountered hummingbird moths previously. I first saw one across the road from where Ida lived. She was the woman who taught me almost everything I know about sewing. My grandmother covered the baseball stitch, but otherwise, Ida, an ethnic German from Romania who had been a refugee in Germany and lived in a house formerly owned by a Jewish family while she was in Germany and then emigrated to the US after WWII, taught me sewing, and after a lesson, I saw a hummingbird moth and didn't know what it was until I looked it up. Then, years later, I could explain the odd creatures to other people. All of that pointless trivia I load into my mind becomes useful, or at least interesting, on occasion.





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When I stopped to take a picture of the bird in the bush, both Rachel and Amy assumed that I had found another bug. Amy was learning quickly, but that time, there was not a bug involved.



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I enjoyed several of these colorful bugs while enjoying my drink (cucumber juice and mint and something) and the view over the water and the travel companions. But mostly the bugs. Not to disparage the other components of the day, but I should at least be honest that the bugs were the highlight.





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We had all wanted to snorkel again, but Rachel and I messed up. Amy said we should rent snorkel masks in town, but Rachel and I said that there'd be snorkel masks at the resort. We were all partially correct. We should have rented equipment in town. There was snorkeling equipment at the resort. The equipment at the resort was only available to people staying at the resort. That was the glitch. We swam.



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Because I collect the glutinous snacks that are provided all over the place and that I can't eat without getting sick, we also fed the entire cast of "Finding Nemo," except the title character.





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This sunset got off to a mediocre start, and stayed mediocre to the west. While Amy and I commented on the factors that could have improved the western view, Rachel suggested that we turn around and watch the sunset to the east. It never hurts to try an unconventional viewpoint.



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We spent a day walking along the water. I should note that the 'days' I'm talking about were usually short, and not only because I'm a napper (so was Winston Churchill, so there) but also because the weather was hot and sunny, and none of us felt like doing much during the hottest part of the day, as with Komodo dragons. So we went out to do something, and then we loafed, and then we went out again for sunsets. It was a good schedule. More fish, maybe the cast of "Finding Dory" that time.





Flores, because of location and history, is a good place to find a mix of interesting people, languages, and ways of doing whatever needs to be done. The crossed roof peaks on these houses are suggestive of architecture on Sumatra, but not nearly to that extent. I recorded employees at the hotel speaking their language rather than the national language. I bought textiles that are made near Flores but not necessarily on Flores: three textiles, one each from the three street vendors because my job as a traveler is to distribute the wealth.



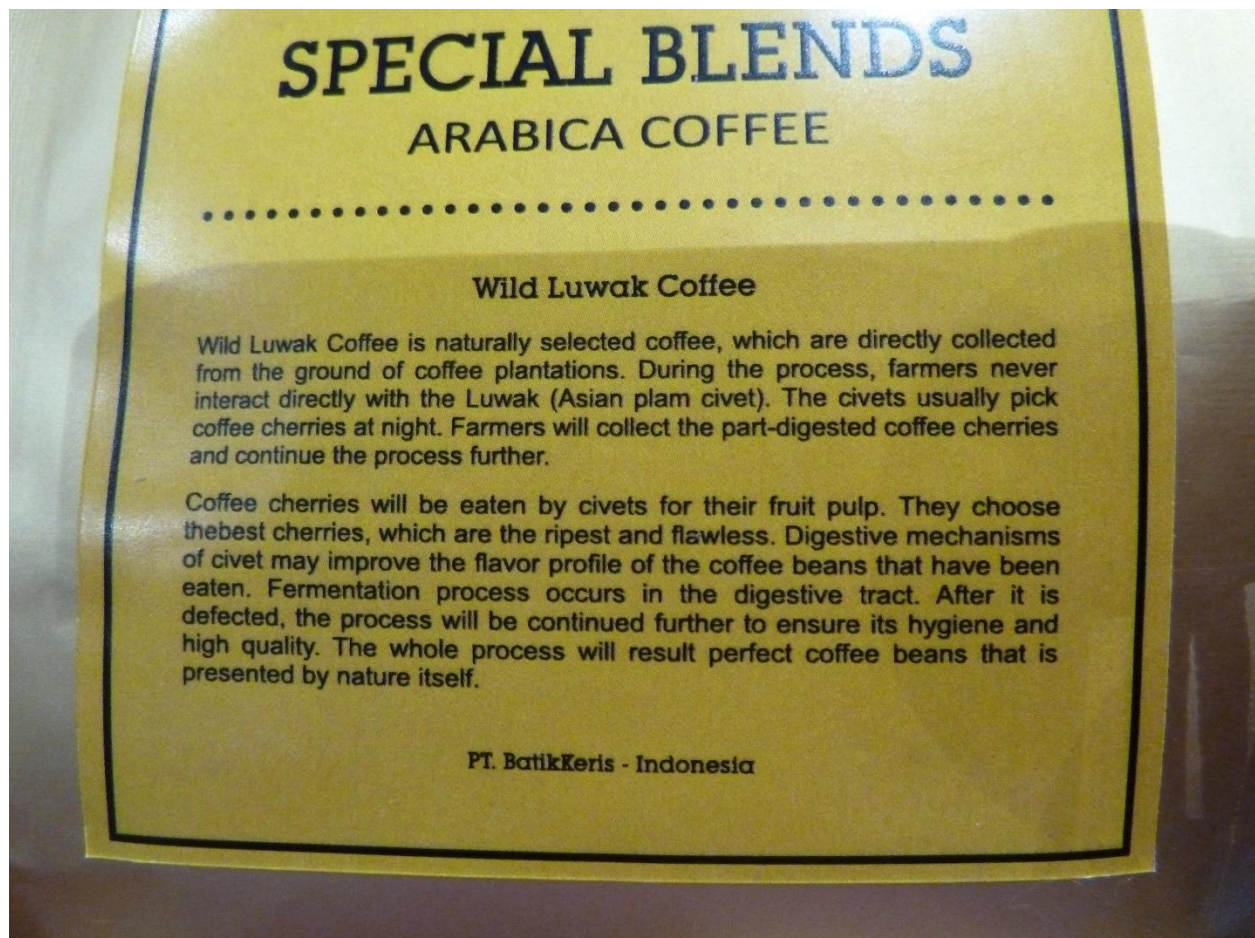
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Another crab because the color scheme and pattern on this crab are similar to the designs and colors of textiles from other parts of Indonesia. I'd like to know if the crabs inspired the textiles. If so, we might have a case for visiting the crabs. I don't know of any textile designs inspired by the Komodo dragons. People make carvings of the dragons, though, so maybe they're still winning.





While we were out and about, I mentioned wanting to find coffee for a friend, and Rachel told me about the cat crap coffee. Not really cats, but the consonance doesn't hurt the commercial break. I found this at the airport. Civets are not cats, but they are nocturnal, have canine teeth, and have long tails, so that must be enough to categorize them with cats in common speech. Luwaks in Indonesian. In any case, the Asian palm civets (*Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*) consume coffee cherries, which ferment in the animals' innards, and after the civets crap the cherries back out, people collect the cherries, remove whatever's left of the fruit, and sell the coffee beans. The coffee is colossally costly, of course, and my friend was thrilled that I had come up with enough cash for what amounted to a couple of cups of coffee. (I would also like to point out how many c's I fit into that paragraph.)



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The cat crap coffee made a nice category with the panda poop tea that I had purchased in China. However, the panda poop tea is just tea fertilized with panda poop. As one of the bags of tea pointed out, pandas are “high-yield” producers of fertilizer. What is it with bodily waste beverages? I’m not sure. I wasn’t overly impressed with the coffee, but I don’t like coffee anyway, so I’m probably not the person to ask. I do like tea, however, and the panda poop tea, although a good tea, was probably not as brilliant as I might have expected. Fun, though.





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Now I know how to bring my groceries back when I can no longer afford a car. I would need to develop a better ability to balance. Maybe I should introduce backpacking backpacks to other parts of the world. Instead, I schlepped my over-loaded carry-on suitcase and small backpack down the hill and hopped on a plane to another, dragonless, part of Indonesia. What a weekend. Rachel kept all of the points.

