

The Collection

“Sunrise is best time to see him,” Wayan said. “You want wake up call?”

Eight hours later, a gentle *tap-tap-tap* on the cabin door wakes me from a deep night’s sleep. Wayan is stood there with a banana in one hand and snorkelling gear in the other. He hands them to me with a toothless smile and points towards a dusty path behind the guesthouse.

“The north shore,” he says. “Be careful of the collection.”

“The collection?” I repeat, wearily. He nods.

It is quiet, save for the caws of an enthusiastic cockerel and his harem of hens, which scratch vigorously at the ground. I walk past snoring wooden houses guarded by tethered cows whose eyes glint in the dawn’s soft light.

The inland path comes to an end and I am on the eastern shore. Towering palm trees shelter beachside shacks that, from lunchtime, will sell bottles of Bintang to a soundtrack of reggae music.

The collection, I learn, takes place on a Thursday morning.

Hundreds of black sacks are piled onto the beach, the tide lapping gently against them. They bulge hazardously, as if teetering on the edge of a sneeze, threatening to burst and reveal their contents.

I stop for a moment, scanning the gargantuan amount of waste. The smell is pungent and my stomach lurches with a deep sense of helplessness.

I jog past the wall of polyethylene and continue towards the north of the island. The beach is uninhabited at this time of the day and its empty, seemingly clean sands are the antithesis of the eastern shore. I squeeze my toes together, feeling the soft coolness of the grains beneath my feet. I eat the banana that Wayan gave me, leaving the peel alongside my towel as I don my snorkel and fins. I run into the water.

A bed of dead coral dominates the shallows. Bleached branches lie lifelessly on the seabed and after a minute of swimming, I start to wonder if Wayan had meant for me to search here. But, through the dim orange haze, the white seabed starts to transform into a scatter of rocky outcrops and colourful sponges.

“Find the barrel,” Wayan had said the night before. Head down, I scour this underwater world for the tree-like structure.

I spot a solitary batfish up ahead. To my right, a butterfly fish swims by. A sea anemone dances in the tide, and I glimpse a flash of orange between its tentacles. I dive towards it and come face to face with a family of clown fish. A bold male approaches my snorkel with a furrowed brow, as if both curious about and irritated by the disturbance.

The sun’s rays ricochet across the corals. From the cerulean of the ocean, the water’s hues a vibrant Parisian blue macaron, I spot a flash of olive green.

Wayan was right.

There, cushioned on a giant barrel sponge, lies one of the island's oldest residents. An aged green turtle, its shell a hexagonal patchwork of earthy brown. I dive down, my ears popping as I sink deeper under the water. The turtle's round, black eyes roll lazily towards me.

"He's nearly as old as me," I hear Wayan chuckling.

His golden head rests on the edge of the sponge whilst his fleshy underside bobs against the coral. A chunk of his left flipper is missing, a spotted edge fringed with a white scar.

I rise to catch my breath and the turtle follows. He swims smoothly to the surface and pokes his face out of the water to take an audible breath. With bubbles drifting from his nostrils, he returns to his sponge.

A hum of engines breaks the silence and I start to swim back to shore, conscious that boats cross these waters, quickly, from all directions. A stream of smoke rises near the eastern shore.

A plastic bag floats ahead of me, and I reach to grab it. A few metres beyond that, an empty can of Diet Coke – 'no calories, no sugar'. As the water gets shallower I realise that a sack has split and spilled into the ocean.

As I reach the beach I throw off my snorkelling gear and return to the water to drag the rubbish out. I forget that dead coral lines the seabed and I cut my toe. Blood trickles gently into the water.

I am startled by a cough behind me. A young local boy, cigarette in his hand, stares at me blankly.

I heave the waste onto the palm-lined path and pick up my banana peel. I go to put it in the bag, and then I hesitate.

"They take it over there," the boy says, kicking the bag softly and pointing to the horizon. "But it always comes back."