

The Empire Strikes Back: Brunei, 2017

by [Lawrence Winkler](#) (June 2024)



To all my friends in Los Angeles: the Sultan of Brunei, owner of the Beverly Hills Hotel, has signed legislation calling for gay people to be stoned to death. –Cleve Jones

It was wedged between two Malaysian states on the northwest coast of Borneo. Robyn and I had to pass through it to get from Sabah to Sarawak so we decided to stop in for a couple of days. Billed as the 'Kingdom of Unexpected Treasures,' there was no initial indication as to how much and for whom.

We awoke at 6 a.m. in Kota Kinabalu to hike to Jesselton Point for the ferry to Labuan. This was the island that the white rajah James Brooke acquired for Britain in 1846, with a navy warship offshore ready to fire on the Sultan's palace if he refused to sign. 'Offshore' would evolve in the island's DNA. Labuan is now a base for our kingdom's vast oil and gas resources, 6,500 shell holding companies, and 300 world class licensed financial institutions dealing in tax avoidance, captive insurance, Shariah-compliant Islamic finance, public and private funds, and wealth management. Robyn and I invested in a wife biscuit and a husband biscuit in the market. And a large bottle of Mount Gay Eclipse rum.

'What's that?' She asked.

'Alcohol.' I said.

'What for?'

'It's illegal in the kingdom.' I said. 'Along with prostitution, homosexuality, premarital sex, gambling, adultery, firearms, smoking, drugs, theft, buying antiques, photography, criticizing the royal family, dressing immodestly, proselytizing, Christmas, and eating.'

'Eating?'

'During the day.' I said. 'We arrive during Ramadan.'

'And we are going there precisely why?' She asked.

'To drink rum.' I said. 'We can do that if we bring our own.'

We boarded our onward boat to the kingdom to find two big guys in our first-class booked seats.

We showed them our tickets. It didn't seem to mean anything.

'It's your country.' We took other seats.

As gigantic offshore oil derricks and rigs passed us on both

sides, we struggled to fill in our tourist alcohol allowance cards.

'Why do they want to know our race?' Robyn asked.

'The Chinese have lower levels of alcohol dehydrogenase.' I said.

'Is that why?'

'I have no idea.' I admitted.

We arrived at the Serasa ferry terminal in the capital city of Brunei. Bandar Seri Begawan translates from Sanskrit as 'blessed haven.' Our bottle of Eclipse rum drew little interest from immigration Mohammed until I pointed out the distillery name.

'You could have brought in more.' He said.

'It's called Mount Gay.' I said. 'I thought we were pushing it already.'

Outside the terminal, we hailed another Mohammed to drive us a half hour €30 journey southwest along the Tutong Highway to the splurge accommodation I had booked for a deal online.

The Empire Hotel and Country Club had billed itself as a luxury seven-star resort. In a 450-acre tropical garden with royal and fan palms and fountains, it boasted 360 rooms, 47 suites and 16 villas of twelve categories. Its largest and most luxurious accommodation was the Emperor Suite with more than 7,000 square feet, carpets flecked with real gold, and its own indoor swimming pool and movie theater.

It boasted one saltwater and nine freshwater pools, one indoor, with a total area of 175,000 square feet harmonized with the spa and sauna and cooling pool, fitness center, aerobics classes, four tennis courts, three air-conditioned squash courts, two air-conditioned badminton courts, eight

bowling lanes, a billiard room and three jumbo-screen cinemas. The Empire had its own signature 18-hole Jack Nicklaus golf course, driving range, and putting green and climate-controlled stables for 200 polo ponies imported from Argentina. Five restaurants served dishes from all over the world. If you were going to stay in a country club, this would be the country. We would be slumming it in The Abode of Peace. And, except for the poofster peak pisswater in our day pack, not a drop of alcohol anywhere. A golf cart took us the rest of the way.

Inside the atmospheric grand entrance of multicoloured marble walls and pillars to high cupolas, inlaid floor mosaics, escalators, a tsunami of teak, glass, chrome, and gold fixtures, a million-dollar chandelier, a half-million-dollar Saudi Arabian crystal camel, and the biggest grand piano in the world, three refined receptionists greeted our arrival.

One of these elegant ladies brought us cool welcome towels and watermelon juice and escorted us down a series of long ornate corridors to our room. After several futile attempts to get the card key to open the door, she summoned a well-tailored middle-aged man with an underwhelmed expression. Without a word, he took the card, inserted it into the slot, and opened another dimension to a capacious apartment with stunning views of the South China Sea. From our balcony, the manicured gardens and nexus of swimming pools and beaches stretched forever. The ocean breeze would have been intoxicating if intoxicating had been legal.

The bed and pillows were gargantuan, the furniture regal, and the marbled bathroom was the size of one of the swimming pools, with a three-nozzle shower, bidet, and gold fixtures. The safe was broken but likely had never been used.

'Welcome to the real Hotel California.' I said.

Robyn and I made for one of the swimming pools, rolled back on

the oversized chaises longues, and tried to take it all in.

'How much... who... why...?' Robyn asked all at once.

'A billion dollars.' I said. 'Prince Jefri Bolkiah ibni Omar Ali Saifuddien III, brother of Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah ... because he could.'

'How?' She was on a roll.

'Once upon a time, on a corner of the large island of Borneo, in Southeast Asia, there was a tiny nation called Brunei where, for 600 years, its royals had married their cousins. Few people took notice of the place until 1926, when F. F. Marriot and T. G. Cochrane, a pair of bicycling Englishmen connected to the Shell Oil Company smelled natural gas seeping out of the earth. The current sultan, the 29th in a long line of rulers subservient to Great Britain, hit the petroleum jackpot when his country gained independence, in 1984. By 1987 he was the richest man in the world, worth \$40 billion.

As word spread of the 41-year-old sultan's gaping wallet, merchants from all over the planet swarmed into Brunei, selling him everything they had to offer—private jets, luxury cars, a 'Smithsonian' of major jewels, and a trove of art masterpieces.

The sultan's biggest extravagance was the love for his youngest brother, Jefri, his constant companion in hedonism. They raced their Ferraris through the streets of Bandar Seri Begawan at midnight, sailed the oceans on their fleet of yachts, and imported planeloads of polo ponies and Argentinean players to indulge their love for the game, which they sometimes played with Prince Charles. They snapped up real estate like Monopoly pieces—hundreds of far-flung properties and an array of international companies (including Asprey, the London jeweler to the Queen, for which Jefri paid \$385 million, four times its estimated market value). Jefri celebrated his 50th birthday with a blowout concert by Michael

Jackson, paid \$17 million to perform in a stadium built for the occasion. When the sultan flew in Whitney Houston for a performance, he gave her a blank check and instructed her to fill it in for what she thought she was worth—a figure somewhere north of \$7 million. The brothers traveled with 100-member entourages and emptied entire inventories of Armani and Versace, buying 100 suits of the same color on every occasion. Their parties were an indulgence in everything forbidden to us in a Muslim country.

From 1986 to 1997, Jefri was the country's finance minister and chairman of the Brunei Investment Agency. He formed his own conglomerate, the Amedeo Development Corporation, named for the artist Amedeo Modigliani, whose work he collected. It built roads, bridges, office blocks, power stations, and hotels overseas and at home. In Brunei, Jefri built a school, a hospital, and this billion-dollar Empire hotel complex and the billion-dollar amusement park next door.

His 1,788-room palace Assurur Palace Residence on 49 acres was without equal in the world for offensive ugliness, one of two personal royal mansions and 600 other properties he owned. A life-size million-dollar statue of the prince holding a solid gold polo mallet stood in front of a 40-foot-high rock-crystal waterfall at the entrance. Inside was a seven-million-dollar custom rug covered in gold threads and 25,000 diamonds. Large wardrobes contained hundreds of designer garments purchased on million-dollar shopping trips. A man of 'unlimited tastes', Jefri also had hundreds of white gold and platinum watches inset with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and other precious stones (ten that depicted a couple copulating on the hour), and a similarly erotic set of fountain pens.

Other personal holdings included a private Boeing 747 with bedrooms, a 25 seater dining table and taps and upholstery covered in gold; 16 other jets from Gulfstream, Falcon and Learjet, and a fleet of private helicopters; a flotilla of yachts including a 60m superyacht he called Tits (which came

with tenders named Nipple 1 and Nipple 2); 2,300 luxury cars including Bentleys, Ferraris, Rolls-Royces, and specially commissioned Aston Martins, none of which had odometer readings that exceeded 4 miles; a huge art collection of works by Manet, Renoir and over twenty paintings by Degas; and a number of illustrious foreign properties including the Dorchester, St John's Lodge in Regent's Park, and the Playboy Club in London, the Hotel Bel-Air and the Beverly Hills Hotel in Los Angeles, the Hôtel Plaza Athénée hotel in Paris, the New York Palace Hotel in Manhattan, and others in Las Vegas and beyond.

Jefri stored billions of dollars of other possessions in 21 warehouses, including a collection of 200 paintings in a secure Swiss vault. He loved to gamble.

The prince had been married 6 times and had nineteen children. When his son Prince Hakeem wanted to learn football, Jefri imported N.F.L. stars Joe Montana and Herschel Walker to Brunei at a cost of seven figures each. Hakeem and his friends showed up in brand-new uniforms. The gargantuan prince weighing 300 pounds, trailed by a valet, and guarded by a state security force. Unable to catch the ball, a teammate would hand it to him, and he would waddle down the field for an easy touchdown, because no one was allowed to tackle him. When Hakeem turned 18, his father gave him \$1 billion as a birthday present. Rod Stewart performed at the party.

Jefri's expenses were estimated at \$50 million a month, a large percentage of which was dedicated to his carnal appetites. He paid women \$127,000 each to fly to Brunei to have sex with him and supported a harem of up to 25 women for several years. In London alone, he kept 40 prostitutes at his Dorchester hotel.

Jefri gave his favorites 'bonus boxes' of expensive jewelry and paid for 'boob jobs' and rents back home. The manifest on his 747 comprised mostly young women. His 'sex parties' at

home, in the air, and abroad, were legendary. Whenever the prince and his posse were on their way back to his palace, a mirrored ball would drop from the ceiling in his disco complex, signaling the women to start dancing.

His fourth wife, Claire Kelly, was from New Zealand.' I said to my Kiwi wife.

'Sluzza.' She murmured.

'But there was a lantern fly in Jefri's lubricant. His other more devout Islamist brother, Mohamed, had only one wife and flew commercial, and had been waiting for his chance to stop the party.' Twenty years before Robyn and I arrived at the Empire, a former Miss USA named Shannon Marketic sued Jefri and the sultan for \$10 million, claiming that she and six other young women, brought to Brunei for 'professional appearances and intellectual conversations' with visiting dignitaries, were forced to serve as 'sex slaves' instead.

Mohamed convinced the sultan that Jefri was 'going to take them down,' which launched an investigation that turned into the costliest legal battle in the world. For \$400 million, two hundred forensic accountants discovered that, over the 15 years that Jefri headed up the BIA, \$40 billion had been embezzled in special transfers. The sultan took his passport and froze the few assets he could locate in Brunei and overseas.

When his misdeeds came to trial, the world's most notorious royal playboy, who had gone through more cash than any other human being on earth, tried to convince the jury that he was naïve about financial matters. In 2000, he agreed to hand over his personal holdings to the government, in return for avoiding criminal prosecution and being allowed to keep a personal residence in Brunei. When they repossessed his luxury supercars, because power to the air-conditioned garages had been cut off, all the tires and the rubber around the windows

had melted in the heat. *What a nice surprise (what a nice surprise)... Bring your alibis...*

At dusk, Robyn and I made our way to one of the Empire's dining establishments. The 15-foot-long hand-carved teak door at the entrance to the Pantai restaurant was swung open from the inside by a young Muslim woman in a hijab. She escorted us to a table and pointed to the endless seafood buffet tables and live stations at the far end of the great room.

'No wine list?' Robyn asked. *We haven't had that spirit here since 1969...*

'Only thing missing.' I said. We worked our way up the food chain—fresh oysters and sushi and sashimi at the raw bar, soups like seafood bouillabaisse and lobster bisque, seafood paella, assorted shellfish in tomato sauce, Japanese izakaya-style tiger prawns and squid satay, Alaskan king crab legs and snow crabs and black pepper crabs, grilled scallops, seared ahi tuna, baked whole salmon, and a prawn tower to the stars.

We passed through grilled corn on the cob and other vegetables and caramelized pineapple, steamed cut vegetables, live cooking stations for pineapple fried rice and soup noodles, and a crispy mix salad bar of oak leaves, mignonette, frisee, lolla rosa, lolla bionda and watercress, grilled artichoke, asparagus, vine ripened and oil cured tomatoes, buffalo mozzarella, imported olives, roasted peppers dressed with homemade Japanese sesame, shallot honey mustard, Thai basil balsamic, or Italian condiments. Charcoal black bamboo bread and other artisanal baking sat along a monster cheese cart with honeydew, rock melon and apples. We ate beef ribs and lamb shanks with round pink peppercorns and finished with varied desserts in tall shot glasses, rich chocolate mousse, pandan kuih batik cake, mini meringue tarts, coffee cream filled puffs, and macarons.

'How much was this?' Robyn asked.

'Forty-five bucks.'

'Really?' She looked confused. 'This is the best buffet in the world.'

'It's more bizarre than that.' I said. 'Look around. this is a restaurant designed to feed 180 people in one sitting. How many other patrons do you see?'

'None!' she exclaimed.

'Exactly.' I said. 'And how many other guests have we seen in this entire billion-dollar boondoggle?'

'None.' She looked around the great room again. 'But how can they afford to prepare all this food and keep this resort running?'

His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah ibni Almarhum Sultan Haji Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien, Sultan and Yang di-Pertuan of Negara Brunei Darussalam, can well afford to bankroll this and hundreds of cushy government jobs, free education, free medical care, subsidized housing, cheap gasoline, no taxes and free trips to the Hajj in Saudi Arabia for all his Muslim subjects.'

'Because of oil revenues?' She asked.

'The locals call it 'Shellfare.'" I said. 'The king of bling is the last absolute monarch in the world. In 2004, he declared himself infallible.'

'It's paradise.'

'But his majesty rules the kingdom of unexpected treasures under a 60-year-old-state of emergency, four years ago he announced his intention to impose Sharia law, and anyone caught with more than a pound of marijuana faces the death penalty.'

'So, not paradise.' She acknowledged. We ascended the sky-high escalator to a Muslim fashion show in session. Robyn could find anything in her colours or taste. We migrated back to our suite to swim in seafood dreams.

We awoke on the first day of Ramadan. There were signs everywhere. *Friday Prayer Closure... In accordance with Brunei national regulations, all restaurant Hotel facilities will be closed for Friday prayers, from 12 noon to 2 pm ... We apologize for any inconvenience the suspension of our normal service causes you ... Thank you for your kind understanding of our observance of the holy prayers.*

Except they were closed for breakfast too, which meant that Robyn and I had to survive on the instant coffee and biscuits we had brought from Labuan Island. It was no great ordeal as we could also metabolize our seafood stores from the night before.

Because everything else at the resort was shut, Robyn and I took a long promenade around the grounds of the resort. In between the polished sheen of two marble flagstones, we came across a small green sapling pushing its way through the smallest of seams. It may have been an ironwood tree; it may have been a mangrove. It didn't matter. What did matter was that here, in Prince Jeffri's most durable legacy to greed and hypocrisy and immutability, a small fault line had opened. Unlike the philodendrons we would see bursting out of the Dayak upriver town storm drains in Sarawak on the next part of our journey, it was just one leaf.

'That's how it begins.' Robyn said. 'The empire strikes back.' A few minutes later, we landed on the artificial beach past another sign or imperfection. *Crocodile sighted. Enter at your own risk.*

'Two hundred bucks a night and they can't even keep the big reptiles off the sand.' I said. 'I wonder if he's fasting for

Ramadan.' *You can check out any time you want but you can never leave.*

'Strike two.' Robyn said.

We drifted back to our room for ramen and old cherry cake, took a nap, and then went off to swim laps in the biggest freshwater pool in the complex. Halfway through my meditative motion, some kid dressed as an alien came by in a raft, throwing bags of powdered chemicals over everything in his way, including me. I asked him what he was flinging. His smile wasn't reassuring.

Fortunately, for the guests at the Empire, the restaurants whirred into life after sunset. Robyn asked me if we should try one of the other dining options.

'I guess not.' She said. And we carpet-bombed the Pantai seafood buffet into endangered status.

The same Mohammed that had brought us to this abode of peace was waiting outside the Empire to take us away next morning. It cost only \$18 to get us into town this time. I asked him what was up with that.

'Ahh.' He said. 'Cheaper to leave than to arrive.'

We were headed back into the blessed haven to have a look around before our bus to Sarawak left later that afternoon. Mimi's De Royale Café sold the tickets for our onward trip and Mimi offered to babysit our packs while we reconnoitred. The space above the till was set off by a poster of a proboscis monkey and an apocryphal caption. *I say old chap, coffee was jolly good.*

We walked back out into deserted streets. You could have fired a cannonball. Our first stop was to the Italian marble columns and golden dome of the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin National Mosque. Its exterior was magnificent, especially juxtaposed

against the ceremonial barge in the foreground, but it was temporarily closed to infidels. *Notice ... To the non-Muslims, the 'Masjid' and all its surrounding area, including the very front entrance gate will temporarily be closed to mark the respected holy month of Ramadhan (Fasting). On behalf of the Masjid (Mosque) Omar Ali Saifuddien BSB, we would like to convey our sincerest apologies.*

On a dilapidated jetty along the Brunei River waterfront, we came across an actual person. A diminutive old man named Mohammed (of course) pointed to his tiny covered wooden boat two stories down a steep gangplank and offered a tour of the city for thirty Brunei dollars. I pointed to the name of his vessel. *Rolex*. He pointed to his naked wrist.

Robyn and I boarded *Rolex* and Mohammed fired up his small outboard. He navigated the narrow passages of the Kampong Ayer water village like he was showing us the sights of Venice. Indeed, the riverine canaliculi through the hundreds of almost floating hardwood houses supplied with electricity and fuel oil and a nautical fire engine station was just as fascinating as the Bridge of Sighs. He took us further upstream and into the mangroves to watch families of proboscis monkeys and a grey-headed fish eagle. He manoeuvred to and around the sultan's Istana Nurul Iman palace of the light of faith and the palace of the extinguished. faith next door, where his ex-wife lived. Then he told us about his own wife, who had died 3 months earlier from a brain tumor.

Back at the De Royalle Café, Mimi hid us under her counter and fed us chicken and rice in violation of Ramadan. She even offered us 'special tea,' which turned out to be Anchor Beer from Singapore. Even Allah didn't know where she got that from.

We said goodbye to Mimi and caught the bus to Miri across the border in Sarawak. It took us four hours to go 180 kilometres and a hundred years forward in time.

There have been few changes in Brunei since our visit to the kingdom of unexpected treasures. Homosexuality is now punished by stoning to death, alcohol is still illegal, and Mimi's De Royale Café is now closed. But somewhere in a billion-dollar resort on the South China Sea, one small leaf has pushed up through a marble walkway like the philodendrons in the gutters of the upriver town of Kapit next door. The Empire strikes back.

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Lawrence Winkler is a retired physician, traveler, and natural philosopher. His métier has morphed from medicine to manuscript. He lives with Robyn on Vancouver Island and in New Zealand, tending to their gardens, vineyards, and dreams.

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