

Our Green Change

A JOURNEY TO GREEN SCHOOL,
BALI AND BEYOND

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This is Green School

I'm barefoot, lounging on an orange bean bag overlooking a lush green football field in a parent chill-out zone. Children sing somewhere in the distance and I can hear the playful tone of marimba drums. Around me are a selection of quirky bamboo pavilions. The air is punctuated by burning incense from offerings dotted nearby.

Welcome to Green School on the island of Bali, Indonesia.

It's mid-afternoon on the first day of term and sweat trickles down my spine. If this is Bali's version of winter, I don't know how I will survive summer.

I've been here all day with my husband, Tyron, exploring the grounds, filling in paperwork and checking on our 9-year-old daughter, Taylor, at lunchtime.

After the build-up to leaving Australia, second-guessing the decision and the stress of packing up our lives, I can't quite believe it's real. I feel like a kid let loose in a candy store. All I wanted to do earlier was soak up every bamboo crevice of the campus. Now I'm hot, tired, but happily sated.

Located less than 30 minutes southwest of Ubud, Green School sprawls across eight hectares of semi-jungle.

Everything from the classrooms, desks and chairs to a selection of small food stalls is made from bamboo. I keep thinking of *Gilligan's Island*, the kitschy American sitcom I watched growing up in the 70s.

Only this is beyond the Professor's wildest dreams.

My favourite is the ATM booth just past the entrance. Tyron thinks it looks like a bamboo version of the TARDIS from *Doctor Who*. Clearly, he was raised on British TV, a step up (arguably) from my diet of US sitcoms.

As far as I'm aware, the ATM booth is also the only air-conditioned space on campus. With the humidity the way it is, I could be making withdrawals on a regular basis.

Looking at the adjacent football field, I am confronted by a wall of elderly Balinese faces. They are part of a temporary photographic exhibition titled *The Rice Warrior of Bali*. Massive black and white portraits – each about three metres high by two metres wide – have been mounted onto bamboo frames that circumnavigate the oval.

The subjects are Green School's neighbouring rice farmers, their enlarged faces wrinkled by a lifetime of toiling under the scorching sun. Some laugh. Others stare hauntingly into the camera's lens. The exhibition is meant to remind us, the school's international community, that we are visitors to this land.

A sense of calm has descended upon the campus. This morning, it buzzed with excitement as everyone caught up after the summer break. And it wasn't just a quick hello at the school gates. This is the type of place where everyone hugs. Parents, students and even teachers were part of the love-in.

I held Taylor's hand as we drove into school this morning. She didn't say much as we sat in the back of a shiny black 4WD but I could tell she was nervous. We gazed silently out our respective windows, watching the island reveal itself – a patchwork of rice fields, temples and bridges, alongside chaotic intersections and rubbish-lined streets.

Tyron (who's mostly known as Ty), was in the front seat chatting with Nyoman, the driver we'd hired to get us around until we found our feet.

We live here now, I mused as Nyoman wove his vehicle skilfully from

one back street to another. Gone were the paved footpaths, manicured lawns and cookie-cutter houses of suburban Sydney.

‘*Selamat pagi*,’ said the school security guard. It’s the good morning greeting you hear across the island.

Dressed in a traditional sarong and headdress, he welcomed us through the school’s bamboo gates along with a swarm of other families.

Past the entrance, a coffee machine gurgled to life. The school’s pop-up-style café did a decent soy latte and I was desperate for one.

I caught snippets of conversation between people in various accents. Everyone looked at ease in this foreign environment and I longed to linger, hoping to absorb the familiarity by osmosis.

‘Come on, Mum,’ Taylor urged. ‘I don’t want to be late.’

We walked past a jungle playground made of used tyres, rocks and rope. It was a world away from the concrete versions I grew up with and led us to the most magnificent three-storey bamboo structure I have ever seen.

Other schools might call this building their ‘administrative centre’. Here it was evocatively named the *Heart of School*.

Described as a bamboo cathedral, Heart of School is one of the largest bamboo structures in the world. With soaring pillars, multiple platforms and three thick central trunks, it dominates the campus.

The premise has various functions. It has a library, classrooms and meeting spaces with desks for staff in its upper levels, while low tables line its wall-less ground floor. A spiral domed roof, in the shape of a double helix, inspired the school’s logo.

We continued towards Taylor’s Grade Four building.

The path was further than what I remembered from Orientation Day and tricky to traverse.

After breaking her leg a few months ago, Taylor was still in a moon boot and had to clutch the odd plant to support her uneven walk.

We passed open classrooms, cute gardens and a large, raised bamboo rabbit hutch where two furry rabbits were foraging for food. They

looked healthy, their plush coats glistening in the sun.

Quite a few kids were sitting cross-legged and barefoot on woven mats when we arrived at the two-storey building. Sitting on the floor was something Taylor still couldn't manage with her wonky leg.

'Don't worry, I'm sure they'll give you a chair,' I whispered, trying to prise the sandal off her good leg but almost bowling her over instead.

She looked up at me, unimpressed.

'Sorry,' I mouthed.

My saviour came in the form of an 8-year-old Australian girl, Poppy, whom we'd met a few days ago.

'Come sit with me, Taylor,' she instructed, and my heart burst with love for this child I barely knew.

This was a big step for Taylor. She wasn't a naturally gregarious kid. Starting a new school in a new country was definitely outside her comfort zone.

'Have a great day.' Ty and I hugged her. 'We love you.'

A gong sounded to signal the start of class. That's right, a *gong*. We were at a school with no walls or uniforms, where the kids roamed barefoot (well, in the classroom at least) and your standard bell had been replaced by the meditative tones of an ancient Tibetan instrument.

I turned to Ty. 'What do we do now?'

We both laughed with relief. We'd finally made it. I was still shocked by the audacity of it all.

Wandering down to the Ayung River, we arrived at the school's iconic bamboo bridge. It's an impressive piece of infrastructure, spanning 23 metres, with a traditional roof curved up at each end like the horns of a water buffalo.

Aside from a school security guard sitting at one end, the bridge was surprisingly deserted, providing ample photo opportunities.

Ty put his arms around me as we paused to soak up the moment, mesmerised by the water gushing over massive rocks below. We'd barely had two minutes alone in the past few weeks.

I felt a sense of relief and excitement for the year ahead. And to think, six months ago, I hadn't even heard of Green School.



SIX MONTHS EARLIER – SYDNEY

It's the tail end of summer and the late afternoon sun is streaming into the living room, creating tiny ripples of colour along the wall. Our small but cosy two-bedroom apartment is situated a few streets back from Sydney's iconic Bondi Beach.

I can hear remnants of a busy seaside day. Laughter and the squeal of kids overlap with the distant sound of waves.

Sitting on the floor, flicking through the Saturday paper's *Good Weekend* magazine, my eyes land on an image of a stunning bamboo bridge surrounded by tropical jungle. It triggers my interest.

The accompanying article is about an international eco-school in Bali that's attracting families from around the globe.

Lithe yoga mums and dads with the occasional man-bun are described hanging out after drop-off, talking about everything from saving the world to where to find the best coffee enemas.

I smirk and read on, intrigued.

The school boasts an education system that values the whole child over rote learning. Younger students raise chickens and sell their eggs as an introduction to economics, while high schoolers take part in UN climate conferences. It also attracts visitors like the world-famous primatologist Dr Jane Goodall.

I feel like I've stumbled across some Steiner-esque environmental nirvana. It sounds totally out of my safe, metropolitan comfort zone, which makes me love it even more.

There's got to be a catch.

Reading on, I find it. Tuition is around AU \$20,000 per annum for primary school alone, which seems like a lot of money for a bamboo school in Bali.

'Hey, Ty,' I call out. He's comfortably engrossed in the paper's business section. 'You know how I'm always banging on about spending a year in Italy? Well, how about Bali instead?'

There's a flicker of interest as he looks up.

'Check out this school near Ubud called the Green School. It's all focused on the environment.'

'Really?'

I start reading sections of the article to him.

Ty and I spent a few years overseas in our 20s. I was a journalist in Hong Kong in between backpacking through Asia and Europe, while he lived and worked in London around the same time.

After returning to Australia, I transitioned to television as a researcher, then producer. I've been lucky enough to travel abroad for work, mostly before Taylor was born.

Over the years, I continued romanticising about 'doing another stint' overseas. Haven't we all? I imagined learning to speak fluent Italian in the country of my parents' birthplace. But between building a career, paying a mortgage and starting a family, life got in the way.

Plus, Ty owns a quantity surveying firm based in Sydney. He started there as a fresh-faced university student on work experience. Over the years, he helped build it from a two-person operation into a successful medium-sized business. Any frivolous talk (on my part) about living overseas was usually met with a blunt reminder (from him) of the realities of running an Australian-based company. I.e., the boss needs to be here.

'Maybe I can run the business from Bali?' he ponders. 'What's the time difference, two, three hours? It's more doable than Europe. And cheaper.'

Not that we'd ever seriously discussed moving to Europe as anything more than my pipe dream.

'Living in Bali would be cheaper but the school isn't,' I say, relaying its hefty price tag.

'It's expensive, yes, but that's less than most private schools in Sydney.'

Taylor has only ever gone to our local government school, so we've been spared that type of expense. But living in Sydney's affluent eastern suburbs means we are surrounded by exorbitant fee-charging privates. The fancier ones can demand almost double that amount for the final years of high school.

I think back to a recent trip we took to Bali for my girlfriend's wedding. The tourists. The heat. The two-hour drive in traffic from our resort in Jimbaran Bay to the pre-wedding drinks in Canggu. The wedding itself was fabulous and Bali's great for a quick overseas holiday, but could I live there?

We ventured to Candidasa (a three-hour drive up the east coast) for a few days post-wedding shenanigans. It was blissful and reminded me of the Bali I first visited almost 20 years earlier. A Bali I'd assumed no longer existed. Fields of green rice paddies dotting the horizon, beautiful water temples, small villages where life went by quietly.

Best of all, there were hardly any tourists. That was courtesy of the volcano, Mount Agung, which started rumbling a few months prior, scaring visitors away.

I almost cancelled our side trip after reading reviews about guests being handed face masks as ash fell on them poolside at the resort we were heading to.

Thankfully, Mount Agung behaved herself during our brief sojourn to her neighbourhood but I was conscious of her looming presence the entire time.

'I don't think I could live in Bali,' I backtrack. 'It's too hot.'

That's another thing about me. I second-guess myself – a lot.

‘I could,’ Taylor chimes in. She’s sitting on the rug nearby, colouring in.

I look over and frown.

Taylor is well-travelled for a child who hasn’t quite clocked her first decade of life. It used to be coastal caravan parks when she was a toddler. But thanks to Ty’s work, we’ve since had a string of resort holidays tied to overseas conferences. When she started upselling the merits of the Sofitel over the Sheraton to a bemused friend of mine last year, I was mortified.

‘What have we done?’ I whispered to Ty.

Neither he nor I had stepped onto a plane, let alone gone overseas until our 20s. How times had changed.

‘Our next family holiday needs to be camping,’ I declared. ‘Pronto.’

True to my word, we embarked on a no-frills back-to-nature camping trip down the south coast of NSW. Despite the lack of electricity, hot water and Wi-Fi, we returned to Sydney pumped with the spirit of adventure. Still, I know where Taylor’s loyalties lie regarding creature comforts. Mine too if I’m being brutally honest, but I’m less likely to complain.

‘This isn’t a “five-star holiday” Bali,’ I explain, using quotation marks above my head.

All she knows of Bali is the kid-friendly resort we stayed at for the wedding, followed by the boutique hotel in Candidasa – both purchased via two very timely Luxury Escapes deals.

‘It’s a school made of bamboo,’ I add. ‘With no flushing toilets. In the JUNGLE.’

I show her the article about Green School, minus the bit about snakes occasionally wandering into open-air classrooms.

‘Could you go to a school like this?’ I ask earnestly. ‘Not just for a week or two but maybe a whole year?’

‘Sure,’ comes the blissful response of a child naïve to the practicalities of such a move. ‘I’d love to learn more about the environment.’

She goes back to colouring in.

Taylor has shown a spark for environmentalism lately, which isn't unusual considering kids learn about it from a young age these days. But after watching a confronting documentary on marine conservation, she became passionate about the topic.

She created a one-page pamphlet with tips on keeping our oceans clean (take three pieces of rubbish when you leave the beach, don't litter, try to catch public transport to combat pollution, etc.) Ty spent the afternoon helping her erect the posters onto telegraph poles, bus shelters and inside the windows of our local shops in Bondi. It was very impressive.

I make a mental note to do some research on 'the Green School' and leave it at that. I have a five-day film shoot coming up for the ABC's *Compass* program and need to focus.

Being a freelance TV producer over the past fifteen years has allowed me to work on various program genres, from lifestyle to observational documentaries. Contracts go anywhere from three to six months or more, depending on the length of the series.

These days I work more on the back end of TV production, writing and post-producing episodes in the edit. I don't do the technical stuff (there are way too many skilled editors for that) but oversee the story development. I've also been working as an Audience Producer on ABC's political panel show *Q+A* now and then, which is more journalistic in nature.

Compass is a long-running series that explores the interface of religion and life. It's old-school storytelling, which I love. You produce a 30-minute episode from beginning to end (with the help of a small but talented production team). It's like making mini-documentaries. There are very few TV shows made that way anymore. I'm excited about the opportunity and desperate to do a good job.

I head to Perth, but Green School lingers in the recesses of my mind.

2

A Love of Learning

What do you want in a school? When you step onto a school campus, what do you want to see, hear, experience and feel? Imagine this, a school without walls, a campus which ignites the senses and the natural curiosity of children, a place where innovation, creativity and learning flourish, a community which has come together from all corners of the globe to share new experiences, a place of joy. (From Green School's website.)

Green School is great at marketing, and fair enough, there is plenty to shout about. By all accounts, it's a school with sustainability at its core and the well-being of children in its heart. Throw in an exotic campus on a tropical island and no wonder families are scrambling over each other to call it home.

The school was founded by long-time Bali residents and former jewellery designers John and Cynthia Hardy. The idea grew out of their frustration, I read, at not finding a suitable school for their children.

After collaborating with architects, permaculturists and philosophers, the school opened with 90 students in September 2008. Fast forward to 2018 and it has close to 500 kids from pre-kindergarten through to Grade Twelve.

There's a much-viewed TED talk from 2010 where John Hardy, clad in a sarong and sandals, speaks about being dyslexic and struggling with school as a child. He talks passionately about Green School as an education model of the future and an incubator for the

next generation of changemakers.

Some parents cite this video as the catalyst for pulling their kids out of traditional schools and crossing the globe to join the Green School fold.

The talk that hooks me, however, is by two students, Indonesian sisters and climate change activists Melati and Isabel Wijzen. I stream the TEDGlobal presentation they gave in 2015 onto our TV for Ty, Taylor and I to watch.

The teenagers say they were inspired by a Green School lesson on significant people and their impacts on the world. They were only ten and twelve years old when they launched the *Bye Bye Plastic Bags* campaign.

Their efforts over the years, including petitions, beach clean-ups, protests and even a (controlled) hunger strike, led to Bali's Governor committing to the phasing out of plastic bags by 2018.

A quick Google search confirms that the ban has not yet come into effect but is in the pipeline. Watching them speak, I'm in awe of what they have achieved.

'So, to all the kids of this beautiful but challenging world,' says Isabel, the younger of the two during the presentation. 'Go for it. Make that difference.'

'We're not telling you it's going to be easy,' she continues. 'We're telling you it's going to be worth it. Us kids may only be 25 per cent of the world's population, but we are 100 per cent of the future.'

If I'm impressed by the environmental influence the school appears to foster in its students, Ty's inspired by its focus on entrepreneurialism.

'Look how confident they are presenting on the world stage,' he enthuses. 'There's no way I could have done that at their age!'

Needless to say, we're both sold on the concept of Green School.

Next, I start digging into the nitty gritty.



Green School comprises of four distinct 'learning neighbourhoods' spread across its expansive campus.

There's 'early years', which covers preschool and kindergarten (ages 3–5). The emphasis here is on learning through play and exploring the living campus. And why wouldn't you? They've got a whole jungle on their doorstep.

Primary school incorporates Grades 1–5 (children aged 6–11). It builds the foundation of a child's learning, fostering curiosity, creativity and individuality. Projects are student-guided and hands-on. Children also learn Bahasa Indonesia (*Bahasa* means 'language') and Indonesian studies. As with other neighbourhoods, connecting with and respecting nature is paramount.

Middle school includes Grades 6–8 (students aged 11–14) and aims to equip students with the life skills required to cross the bridge from childhood to adolescence. Aside from core subjects such as maths, literacy, science and green studies, students have more control over their learning by choosing electives.

High school covers Grades 9–12 (students aged 14–18). According to the school's website, the aim here is to ignite a life-long love of learning and critical thinking beyond the classroom and graduation.

There are no final exams at Green School. Students need a certain number of credits to graduate and receive a GPA (Grade Point Average), which can help them get into *some* universities. I'm told about 50–65 per cent of graduates go on to continued education of some variety.

High school seems to be where the student numbers peter out. I guess that's because most parents want their kids to go to university. I know I do.

As for the curriculum, it seems hard to pin down. I discover that the school has created its own, balancing specific real-world themes with traditional subjects and a whole lot of hands-on, getting dirty type stuff.

The focus is on 'how' kids learn rather than 'what' they're taught. There's a lot of talk about teaching kids the ability to 'bend like

bamboo', which is something *both* Taylor and I could benefit from.

The school's mission is to build a community of learners making our world more sustainable and that sounds fab to me. For a year at least.