

Talking to Tokays

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Ubud has always attracted a different kind of foreigner than Kuta or Seminyak. Until recently we tended to be the original hippies, the greenies, the tree-huggers, the Wiccans. Now that we are in the full flower of our maturity (middle-aged), our eccentricities are perhaps growing more pronounced. We don't really notice it when we're pottering in our gardens or comparing our cholesterol readings over a companionable arak. We actually feel quite conservative when we observe the tattoos and dreadlocks of the newcomers. We assure ourselves that several decades in the tropics have had no impact on us.

Our house guests disagree. They particularly find our casual acceptance of bats, toads and other harmless wild life in the house to be incomprehensible. They have no reptiles on their bedrooms walls at home in London or Toronto. There are no loud, mysterious thumps and skittering footsteps in their ceilings at night. Their dogs never sit staring at the roof with alarm. Some are broadminded about this proximity to other species, others try to be and the rest go and stay in an air-conditioned hotel room.

Jenny's daughter is visiting from England. She grew up in Singapore and is a good sport about these things. But once she noticed a very large Tokay was living in her bedroom, she took to sleeping with her mother at night. I've had houseguests sit up all night with the lights on because they thought they saw a rat. (They probably did).

I find Canadian bedrooms to be a bit lonely and sterile after 20 years in livelier climes. No creature, even a tiny spider, is suffered to live on those cold white walls. (Of course, in Canada one never brings up the subject of lizards, some of them highly vocal, lurking behind the pictures.) So when I returned to Bali recently after five weeks in Vancouver, I was happy to be welcomed by Ted the Tokay. Ted is an outstanding specimen who has been living behind a hanging on my bedroom wall for about five years. He's exceptionally large and handsome and has been known to utter his call up to 15 times without drawing breath, which other Tokay aficionados will have to admit is a bit of a record.

On the night of my return he poked his head out from behind the hanging to watch me unpack. He must have been quite glad to see me in his reptilian way, because after a while he began to serenade me. "Toe-kaaayyy" he crooned. "Toe-kaaayyy," I responded, trying to match his throaty tone. We went back and forth like this, call and answer, for a few exchanges until I realized what I was doing. You know you've been in Bali too long when you catch yourself talking to reptiles on your bedroom wall in their own language.

I've always had a fondness for Tokays, ever since I first heard one call many decades ago in what was then a quiet suburb of Kuala Lumpur. When I built my house in Ubud, I considered it very lucky that a Tokay moved in the same day I did. The nocturnal creatures are very territorial and mature males chase smaller and weaker guys out of their patch and away from their harems. A few years ago there was a protracted Tokay war in my house, when all the adult males were fighting for dominance. Battered warriors would appear under furniture and in corners with big chunks bitten out of them and sometimes a leg missing. This went on for a few weeks until the biggest, meanest Tokay of all had made his point.

I'm happy to have Tokays in the house. They eat insects, centipedes, scorpions, cockroaches and baby rats. They are entertaining to watch and guaranteed to elicit excited squeaks from first-time visitors to the tropics. Tokay romance is a rough business, with the male immobilizing the object of his affections by biting her hard while he has his way with her. A month or two later she lays a couple of marble-sized eggs; I sometimes find these adhering to the inside of the mailbox or under the dining table. She will lay several clutches a year and the eggs take three or four months to hatch. When these eggs are laid on packing crates, baby Tokays sometimes find themselves growing up in foreign lands.

Perhaps because of their call, Tokays are regarded as harbingers of luck. Some Southeast Asians count the calls and use the results to choose winning lottery ticket numbers, foretell the gender of an expected baby or make important decisions; an even number of calls means yes, an odd number indicates no. Personally, I think the Tokay just runs out of breath. Their calls are used for communication, finding members of the opposite sex during the breeding season, and as a means of defense -- they emit a hissing or croaking noise when under threat.

You may have noticed that Tokays always relieve themselves in exactly the same place, year after year. If this happens to be on your coffee table you had better move the table, because they are very set in their ways and since they live about eight years in the wild it's going to be an ongoing issue.

In researching this creature, I came across a number of websites offering Tokays for sale as pets, with advice on how to keep them healthy and happy and breeding in more temperate climates. As a pet, the Tokay is considered the pit bull of the Gecko world due to the fact that it bites hard, often refusing to let go for a few minutes or even an hour. This is said to be pretty painful, and having a 40 centimetre long reptile attached to your hand makes it inconvenient to check your email. They are difficult to remove without harming them, and the preferred method is to place a drop of vinegar on its nose. (File this helpful advice for future encounters.) Due to its snappish temperament, Tokays are not recommended as pets for children. However, like most other creatures, the Tokay is shy and will never bite unless threatened.

But my research also revealed a more ominous trade. Tokays are a popular ingredient of the traditional medicine industry, used to treat various ailments including coughs, kidney stones, skin conditions and sexual dysfunction. In Malaysia, some people actually believe that the reptile's tongue can cure AIDS and that its blood and bile suppresses tumors in cancer patients. Augustine Tuuga, the deputy director of Sabah Wildlife Department, denied in a news report that there is any scientific evidence to verify these claims. But predictably, the rumour has created a steep demand for these attractive reptiles.

Catching and trading Tokays has become a lucrative side business for villagers in the northern West Malaysian states and in East Malaysia, who have seen the Tokay business grow into a cottage industry. News reports revealed that overseas buyers are willing to pay huge amounts of money for each reptile -- prices of thousands of dollars for specimens weighing more than 300 grams can be found on the internet. Malaysian newspaper The Star and Thai TV stated that Malaysian gecko hunters were active in Southern Thailand where they approached locals with the hope of purchasing Tokays. As buyers are only interested in Tokays weighing 300 grams or more, villagers are catching and keeping the reptiles in cages and feeding them chicken livers to fatten them up.

I'm keeping all this from Ted, of course...

Chiko, the chatty Eclectus parrot, continues to expand his repertoire. He skillfully mimics my voice calling Wayan and Hamish, and convincingly barks like a dog and croaks like a toad. Recently he has begun to produce Ted's distinctive call. Soon I won't be the only one in the house who is talking to Tokays.

Ibu Kat's book of stories *Bali Daze - Freefall off the Tourist Trail* is available from:

1. *Ganesha Books in Ubud and Seminyak*
2. *www.balidazethebook.com downloadable as a PDF file*
3. *Amazon downloadable for Kindle*