

## Acknowledgement

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William Harrison

# Magic mushrooms and allowed use abroad

by William Harrison

People disagree as to whether magic (psilocybin-containing) mushrooms are, or are not, precious, misunderstood, God-given blessings, but currently here in the U.S. they are prison bait. Under federal law, they are illegal (Boire, 2002) – illegal to possess, grow, give away or sell. Federal penalties for magic mushroom doings are severe, so purchasing and using abroad, where they are legal, can be a much wiser choice than collecting or growing them illegally here.

Magic mushrooms are legal or tolerated in lots of places abroad (Gartz,

1996), but many people had best not use – especially anyone with mental or emotional problems or a family history thereof. Many have fine experiences. Some, though, end up temporarily ill or incoherent, with a panic attack, or worse. Almost every year there are a few deaths worldwide, due to the bizarre behaviors that can result from overdose, including a famous case a few years ago in the Netherlands.

By 2006, magic mushrooms had become quite popular in the Netherlands. That year, there were 128 magic mushroom-related ambulance emergencies in Amsterdam – mostly short-term panic attacks or disorientations. For perspective, there were some 500,000 mushroom packets sold there that year, so the percentage of emergency outcomes was tiny. On March 24, 2007, though, an underage French girl took mushrooms, overdosed, wandered away from her friends, and jumped to her death from a building onto a freeway. Dutch newspapers kept the tragedy on their front pages for weeks, the Dutch Legislature responded, and a national ban on the sale of fresh magic mushrooms took effect on December 1, 2008.

Should the vast majority who use responsibly, though, be penalized for the behavior of a tiny few who don't? Perhaps that thought entered the minds of some who drafted that new law. In that law, all species of psilocybin-containing mushrooms were outlawed. Psilocybin, though, also shows up in the sclerotia (underground "tubers" encouraged by adverse growing conditions) of certain

psilocybin containing mushroom species. Such sclerotia (neither mushrooms nor truffles, but commonly called magic truffles) were not outlawed. So, "magic truffles" remain legal in the Netherlands. They are sold, as were magic mushrooms, only in the Smart Shops. Purchasers are supplied with detailed warnings and instructions. That alone makes them much safer there than here. But, is that enough? Should more be done, even there, to protect users?

All who try magic mushrooms should know the dangers, and how best to avoid them. Outside the Netherlands, though, little if any information and few warnings are offered. But mushroom shop managers are knowledgeable, so interested tourists should be inquiring as to proper amount and use, how to recognize freshness, where best to use, where not to use, how best to avoid overdose, etc. If you visit a magic mushroom shop that doesn't offer such information, you might request they do. And what about mycological societies here? Is there anything they could do to better inform their members and the public?

How best to use magic mushrooms where legal? R. Gordon Wasson saw them as sacred sacraments. As he stated in his book *The Wondrous Mushroom* (Wasson, 1980) "I have often taken the sacred mushroom, but never for a 'kick' or for 'recreation.' Knowing as I did from the outset the lofty regard in which they are held by those who believe in them, I would not, could not, so profane them." Wasson would have preferred magic

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Mukur procession at dawn, Kuta Beach.

## magic mushrooms

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mushroom use to have remained sacred rituals of the types he found among the Mazatecs in Huautla de Jemenez. That was not to be.

As for what is? One recent trend in Indonesia is to serve magic mushrooms as a weak-strength, sweetened fruit shake – weak enough so that even tourists who have had a beer or two can still handle them. Many Bali tourists do wander the streets with a beer in hand, so lowering the mushroom dose to compensate is sensible. There isn't all that much magic in most such shakes, and no one seems to be passing out or overdosing. For socializing, a mushroom shake there seems fine. And just a small dose (hopefully without alcohol) is maybe a good idea for first-timers.

A few of the many places where magic mushrooms are currently legal (or tolerated) and sold: *the Netherlands*: Amsterdam (sclerotia only); *Mexico*: Huautla de Jimenez, San Jose del Pacifico, and Palenque; *Guatemala*: Panajachel; *Jamaica*: Negril; *Indonesia*: Parangtritus (Java), Kuta (Bali), Lake Toba and Medan (Sumatra), and Gili Trawangan (Lombok); *Thailand*: Koh Phangan; *Laos*: Vang Vieng; *India*: Kodaikanal (Tamilnadu), Old Manali (Himachal Pradesh), and Idiki district (Kerala). I'll expand on just one of those: Kuta in Bali.

### Kuta in Bali, Indonesia

Twenty hours on Eva Air from Los Angeles, along with a four-hour layover in Taipei, gets you to the island of Bali in Indonesia – a popular tourist Mecca for sunning, swimming, scuba diving, plus arts, crafts, temples, and ceremonies. To most Balinese, it is the home of the gods. Just a couple of miles from the Bali airport is the city of Kuta, with its long white sandy beach (not so clean during the rainy season

when the rivers spew rubbish, but beautiful in the dry season).

Balinese know and tolerate magic mushrooms, but that's as far as it goes concerning drugs. Drugs such as pot, hashish, methamphetamine, ecstasy, etc., are widely despised by the locals and authorities. Possession or use of any of those in Bali can put one in jail for a long while, or worse. So why this tolerance for mushrooms? The Balinese-Hindu religion is full of gods, demons, magic, and community duty. The spiritual magic of the mushroom sort of fits in – those others just don't.

There's little or no commercial magic mushroom growing in Bali. Magics are collected from cow fields about a week after a rain. Motorcyclists head out early in the morning, collect for three or four hours, then head back to Kuta to sell to the mushroom shops. Should you wish to join in the collecting, check with shop workers such as Kadek at Warung Midnight.

The magics of Bali are mostly *Copelandia cyanescens*. In them, the weight percent of active ingredients (psilocybin and initial metabolite, psilocin) can vary by a factor of 3 or so. Hence, the shop-recommended amount can be rather too much or too little. Avoiding overdose on moderate strength or strongish trips, therefore, demands taking a portion, waiting, then evaluating yourself. Smaller mushrooms are more potent, so if dividing to share, you divide the small and large separately.

There were more than 20 shops and bars in Kuta, as of January 2011, selling magic mushroom packets, omelets, or shakes. Some of the more popular lie along Jl. (Jalan or Street) Benesari 1 as you walk in towards the beach from Jl. Legian. Others lie nearby on Jl. Benesari 2, parallel to Legian. Four or five older shops are in the alley 40 feet south of Bemo Corner that connects Jl. Buni San with Jl. Raya Kuta. Currently, Kuta is the only town in Bali

that has mushroom shops and bars. Even if you are enough of an expert to pick your own mushrooms, your patronage would be greatly appreciated in supporting the local economy.

Several of Kuta's newer mushroom bars also serve alcohol. But no need to mix them. Just a few with a beer might be no problem. Too much of either, though, can make for a drunken overdose. Nor are mushrooms suitable as an out-to-the-bars party drug. If one intends to hit the bars, clubs or nightlife, it's best to skip the mushrooms. One Australian lady told me of a pub crawl that her group did, with mushrooms as a starter, that got all six of them retching.

Stamets recommends being out in nature for magic mushrooms (Stamets, 1996). In Kuta, some do them at about 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon, then walk up the beach. With or without mushrooms, that can be one of the nicest walks in Bali. With them, one may get to know and appreciate nature better than ever before. With a glorious sunset, some moon, clouds, stars, and dancing cosmic fractals, the experience can be most awesome and spiritual. Should there be a Hindu ceremony or gamelan group along the way, that too may live in your memory forever. Some do their mushrooms just sitting at tables in mushroom bars. Most all of Kuta's mushroom bars, though, face streets that are busy with motorcycle traffic. The on-and-off roar of motorcycles tends to considerably decrease the magic of the experience, hence some prefer doing their mushrooms on Gili Trawangan – a two hour boat ride from Kuta. There, motorcycles are prohibited and quiet reigns.

Bali is unique – a mostly Hindu society in which most all are strongly bonded to temple, village, traditional values, and daily duties to ancestors, demons, spirits, and gods. Balinese navigate all that quite well





Kadek collecting *Copelandia cyanescens*.



and are known for their sense of fun and joy. It is a place in which you can learn a lot about their culture, and your own. On the street, beach, or most anywhere, locals bombard tourists with questions. Where going? Where come from? Where stay? Such is quickly picked up by us who infect others. Thus, it's a most friendly place – one that you might care to return to often.

Warnings: (1) Do not swim in the sea at night, or while on mushrooms day or night. (2) In the daytime, swim only between the red flags, where lifeguards are on duty. Strong undertows are common. (3) If you are doing one of those assisted, up-the-beach walks, it's best not to bring your camera, wallet, purse, passport, or valuables – just a towel to sit on, a copy of your passport information page, and a small amount of cash.

### Concluding Remarks

- Anyone interested in magic mushrooms should know well the dangers

– and especially how to avoid overdose. For a Bali slant on that, plus some coverage on a few other places where legal or tolerated, see [shroomswherelegal.com](http://shroomswherelegal.com).

- Mycological societies everywhere should honestly inform as to the dangers, and responsible use, of magic mushrooms. People do travel, and many try magics overseas, so not educating is not good. If in a mycological society, push for education. At mushroom fairs, some sort of handouts should be available – at least to the interested. And, in the book area, at least some conservative viewpoint books like: *Psilocybin Mushrooms of the World* by Paul Stamets, *The Wondrous Mushroom* by R. Gordon Wasson, and *Shroom: A Cultural History Of The Magic Mushroom* by Andy Letcher.

- If lots more of us would simply choose to vacation where magic mushrooms (or magic sclerotia) are legal, safety concerns could be better pushed, and the experience made safer. With lots more visiting those special places, our government might even take note of what attracts us there – and ease up a bit on punitive punishment here.

- If at a mushroom shop or bar abroad and warnings aren't posted regarding responsible use, push for that. People buying by the bag particularly need to know how to avoid overdose. So it's the bag shops that most need prompting.

- Danger with magic mushrooms lies mostly with strong trips – where amount, portion size, waiting, self-evaluating, and place all become really important. Some guidance and protection for those intending strong-dose use, especially for first timers, would not be a bad idea. The Mazatecs of Huautla de Jemenez do their mushroom *Valadas* in safe, supervised locations. Ayahuasca\* users do likewise (Adelaars, 1998). One wonders why that sort of option is not offered in Bali, Amsterdam, and everywhere else. Such could have prevented that French girl's death in Amsterdam, and many deaths and accidents elsewhere. Do request and push for such if visiting abroad.

- Studies suggest that psilocybin can benefit many in a variety of ways (Griffiths, 2008; Jerome, 2007). Psilocybin mushrooms do act similarly. In certain settings, they stimulate profound spiritual experiences (for clues as to the cause of that and other effects see Ramachandran, 2011). In others, they seem to provide insights into nature and life. They

intensify feelings, stimulate imagination, focus attention, alter perception, and tweak the erotic. Medicinally, they uplift terminal cancer patients and cure cluster headaches. They can both inspire and enhance art and music. Mazatecs use them for probing problems, illnesses, and worries. Indonesian villagers, when sitting around with friends, occasionally pass a few around to stimulate conversation and camaraderie. Others might throw a party where the mushrooms interact in different ways – uplifting, meditative, spiritual, or celebratory. Which is the proper use? Perhaps any use, where legal, is proper so long as the participants are well informed and use them respectfully and responsibly.

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 \*Ayahuasca is a vine and leaves extract, used as sacrament by several Christian sects in Brazil, that's similar in effect to magic mushrooms, but vomit inducing. ☘