

The New Bali

Rebounded and refreshed (and well away from the tsunami), Indonesia's most magical island enters its renaissance.

By **Gisela Williams**



Living on the island of Bali in the early nineties, I witnessed amazing things: young girls dancing in a trance over burning red coals; five small Balinese men lifting my jeep from a ditch without strain or hesitation; women gracefully balancing 50-pound loads on their heads while walking along slippery paths in rice fields. During my two years there, I came to learn that in Bali the usual logic does not apply.

So it came as no surprise to hear that, against the odds, Bali is back. Most travelers had abandoned the island in the wake of the 2002 bombing in Kuta. And though Bali itself wasn't much affected by the blows dealt the whole of Southeast Asia (SARS, the bird flu, and the devastating tsunami), they have only hindered tourism in the region. But these days Bali is more enticing than ever, having spent the last two years in a frenzy of renewal and reinvention, and high-end travelers are checking back in. Even the Balinese themselves marvel at the pace of the comeback. "Just look at Kuta," says jewelry designer Tricia Kim, an ex-New Yorker living here. "A place called Fuel opened just a few days ago next to the bomb site. It used to be a horrible club and now it's a cool lounge with great food." That's just one example among many in a province that has remained both flexible and resilient (it is steadfastly Hindu, for example, while all its neighbors are Muslim). Arriving in Bali now, one finds not a provincial, if lively, little isle, but a place with enough savvy to offer up multiple versions of paradise. There are sprawling cliff-top villas and smart restaurants in the south; yoga centers and ecolodges among the emerald rice fields around Ubud; and in the untrampled north, chic hideaways where a new class of adventurers are exploring Bali's last frontier.

[The South]

Kuta and Nusa Dua may be the most visited destinations, but the boomingest town in southern Bali is Seminyak, once a sleepy bohemian enclave ten minutes north of Kuta. European jet-setters, honeymooners from Hong Kong, and smart Australians now fill the restaurants on Jalan Oberoi (known as Eat Street) and browse the shops along Seminyak's hectic main drag. The scene has become so stylish that Seminyak has been dubbed the Ibiza of Southeast Asia; it even has its own glossy English-language magazine, *The Yak*, filled with local gossip and reviews. "Some people come to Bali for culture, some come for the cocktails," jokes one of the editors, Sophie Digby, as she and I sip cappuccinos at Ku di Ta, the beachside restaurant that serves as Seminyak society's unofficial headquarters. "In terms of the level of design," she adds, "this area has gone from Rough Guide to Wallpaper." Ku di Ta, with its slick black U-shaped walls framing idyllic ocean views, is a case in point. The French architect Fredo Taffin is Bali's own Philippe Starck, responsible for Seminyak's trendiest space—the recently opened members-only Paparazzi Lounge in the nightclub Double Six, the Downtown Villas compound, and ten beachfront villas next to the Gado Gado restaurant—as well as the new villa Istana, consisting of five bedrooms and an infinity pool on the Uluwatu Peninsula. Once the dry, empty southern tip of the island and home to only a few die-hard surfers and the Uluwatu temple, the peninsula has become one of Bali's most glamorous spots. The colonial-style Bayuh Sabbha has just gone up, with nine villas, two pools, a tennis court, and a garden designed by Made Wijaya. Wijaya, who has created tropical gardens for David Bowie and the Four Seasons Jimbaran Bay, is also in charge of the landscape of Uluwatu's new Bulgari resort, Bali's most anticipated hotel (opening this fall). Hotelier Christina Ong may soon follow suit; rumor has it that she recently bought property here.

[Ubud and Beyond]

If South Bali attracts an Ibiza set, then Ubud is for a Santa Fe crowd: artists, intellectuals, and wealthy New Agers who come to Bali's central region for a cocktail of tropical design, spa treatments, and spiritual reinvigoration. "Ubud is about people, culture, and nature," explains Tjok Putra, a member of Ubud's royal family. "Our commitment is to maintain that balance while moving forward." To that effect, Putra has become a generous sponsor of local students, artists, and dancers; he also runs a hotel-management school that trains the staff at his three hotels. After lunch at the Hotel Tjampuhan, a royal-family holding since 1944, Putra escorted us to the site of his latest project, the Royal Pita Maha. Ubud's largest resort, it will open half its 92 villas this month; the rest will be finished by the end of the year. Unlike its neighbors such as the Four Seasons Sayan and Amandari, which offer modern takes on local architecture, Pita Maha is purely Balinese. Traditional stone murals, sculptures of Hindu gods, and paintings of silk-wrapped dancers decorate the hotel, whose construction was delayed because of the dearth of tourists after the bombing. "The traffic light for Bali was yellow," he says. "Now it's green."

Besides Ubud's new resorts (which will soon include Orient-Express's forthcoming Hanging Gardens), what draws many to this region is the Balinese experience on a smaller, more personal scale. Which is why interior designer Linda Garland recently began taking guests at her estate, Panchoran, a 25-acre ecosystem of bamboo, recycled teak, lacy hammocks, and waterfalls, which she has spent 30 years perfecting. "Ubud is more about health; it's an artistic and intellectual center," she says. "[The club] Exiles on a Saturday night is the closest one gets to a rave up here."

As laid-back as Ubud may be, its restaurant scene has nonetheless been recharged. Chris Salans, chef of the French-Asian restaurant Mozaic, says that "we were pretty empty for a few months" after the bombing. Today the place is booked weeks in advance. Even the old standbys have caught a second wind. A dozen years ago I used to drink juice on batik pillows at Ary's Warung; now I'm sipping a ginger martini on a goat-hide stool at the bar. "Just two years ago we thought everyone would have to close down," says owner Agung Odeck. This winter he'll open Betel Nut, an Asian-style bistro down the road.

[The North]

With no sprawling resorts, no nightlife, and few good beaches, the north is rarely on the radar of most travelers to Bali. And that's just the way Diana von Cranach, who with her Balinese husband, Gusti, owns Puri Ganesha Villas in the northwest coastal village of Pemuteran, likes it. "People come up here to chill out," the 56-year-old British interior designer tells me as we sit in the open-air restaurant on her property. At the Puri Ganesha, guests take over one of four lushly decorated villas, all with thatched roofs, pools, gardens, and wraparound terraces. Von Cranach has filled each villa with pieces collected on her travels: carved daybeds, colorful silk pillows, bathroom sinks made of single clamshells, and her style has attracted a very cool crowd, British fashion designer Matthew Williamson included. Von Cranach's knowledge of the area is impressive; she can gossip with you over dinner, take you on a shopping spree in Ubud, and teach you how to cook the Indonesian dishes she learned from her mother-in-law. The coral reefs off the coast and around nearby Menjangan Island have some of the finest snorkeling and diving on Bali; Von Cranach can organize a day with divemaster Chris Brown, whose turtle sanctuary is five minutes down the beach. "This is the place for people who have been partied out in the south or cultured out in Ubud," she says. "They come up here for a little bit of Bali as it still is."

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