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Indonesia: The Bali high life

In spite of a troubled year, Bali remains a favoured destination for discerning travellers seeking luxury living at package prices. Report by **Ariel Leve**

Plenty of islands are easier to get to and more affordable. But Bali pulls people like nowhere else in the world. Visiting the island is a sensual experience. Aside from offering the usual in a tropical vacation, such as sunshine, beaches and tranquillity, it offers inspiration. It's all there - you only have to know where to look. Like the garden of Eden, Bali overwhelms the senses. Swept up in the smells of bougainvillea and frangipani, the air is sultry and intoxicating - so fragrant that it anaesthetises - and inhaling becomes instant purification.

In between the luxury hotels and backpackers' hostels are far more intoxicating options. The secret of Bali is the breadth of luxury villas, bungalows and estates for hire, with or without staff, at prices that would make a two-star hotel blush. This option provides an opportunity to have an authentic Balinese holiday rather than the micro-managed 'Balinese experience' you might expect from one of the larger hotels.

All the private villas, which are located all over the island, come with cooks, housekeepers and gardeners, who will take care of everything. You wake up in a private villa on the Mertasari estate in Sanur, an unspoilt seaside community on the southeast coast, the first rays of morning light shimmering through the coconut and banana trees. You're greeted with a plate of fresh papaya and mango, a cup of kopi Bali (Balinese coffee) from a beautiful, handmade ceramic mug, and a view over the lotus pond. The homes have thatched roofs, air conditioning, and everything you could need to feel comfortable but not cut off.

There is a Shangri-La quality to the landscape: everywhere you look you can see lush greens and fiery red hibiscus flowers. Reading by the pool or lounging on an oversized bamboo couch, enjoying sumptuous meals of fresh grilled fish prepared by the cooks on your own private porch, it's easy to lose yourself in the temptation to do nothing. The distinctive, Lumbung-style architecture - a traditional, Balinese

rice storage barn accessed by a ladder, with a thatched roof that you sleep under - is to be found all over the island. There's a Lumbung house for rent on Mertasari; when you wake up you're high in the trees, or overlooking the rice paddies or the sea, depending on where you stay.

Charlotte's home is in Sai Sai Beach, a more remote, rural part of the island. To get there you drive through some of Bali's most scenic areas, past miles of rice paddies and pondoks - little bamboo pavilions where the farm workers rest. Hidden away, the stylish round house is chic and beautifully designed while incorporating the natural elements of Bali, such as open-air architecture. There is a bathroom opening onto the garden, but what makes this house special is Charlotte's unique sense of design. The bathroom sink is a seashell. The living room and kitchen are one open space. The latter sparkles with mother-of-pearl that has been incorporated into terrazzo finishes. There is a small, round guesthouse that is essentially a huge bed - intimate and sexy, with white linens and billowy curtains.

The main house opens onto gardens, and the private pool sits among a swathe of vegetation. With a spectacular view of the rice paddies, the house is a five-minute walk from the village and 100 metres from the beach. It feels like a love nest - not great for kids, but it's classy and romantic.

When you stay in one of Paul's bungalows - his motto is 'The answer is yes; what's the question?' - everything is taken care of. The Bougainvillea villa, for example, is open and breezy, but still very private. The house has a peaceful, Zen-like quality and the gardens are like a Gauguin painting. If you come with your family, you'll never have to leave the house. There's cable TV, hook-ups for the internet, faxes, etc. The private pool is built into the mountain, so you're surrounded by nature as you swim. Meals are served at the dining table or by the pool. Staying here is like being in a luxury hotel - but without any other guests.

If you're looking for the less developed parts of the island, head for western Bali. The Waka Shorea resort bungalows are sophisticated and hidden in the trees of the national park. You can stay in little wooden tree houses, or swim in the ocean, where you'll find some of the island's best snorkelling. Or, on the north side of Bali, stay at Pemuteran, where bungalows at the Pondok Sari have a view onto the sea.

One of the most popular destinations in Bali is Ubud, a bustling village in the mountains famous for its artists. It is considered the cultural heart of Bali but it has become overcrowded and full of tourists. The best way to experience it is to stay in a secluded, tranquil private estate, such as that of Linda Garland. A more traditional, less developed village to stay in is Munduk. It is still located in the mountains but it's cooler, and you can hike through clove plantations, which is like walking through a cloud of spice, water and light.

If you decide to leave your private villa, you should try Jimbaran Bay. Here you can sit outside at a table under the stars and enjoy fresh grilled fish for the price of a pack of gum at one of the hotel gift shops.

As with every popular resort area, there are two Balis: a place re-created for the tourists, and the real place. It is in the second, by renting a private home, that you will feel as if you're experiencing the real Bali - and you have stumbled upon a secret paradise you'll never want to leave.

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