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ARCHIVES

Bali - Indonesia's Island of the Gods

By Jon Letman — SPECIAL TO THE GARDEN ISLAND

Posted: Monday, Jan 09, 2006 - 01:01:21 pm HST

It took four different flights and a day and a half to travel more than 6,000 miles, half way around the world from Kaua'i and now you find yourself beneath a palm tree on a beautiful beach watching Japanese tourists watch the surfers and you say to yourself, "Am I crazy, or what?" No, you're not crazy. You're in Bali – Indonesia's "Island of the Gods." But why spend precious vacation time visiting a tropical paradise when you already live in one? Besides, didn't the U.S.

State Department issue a travel warning for Indonesia (travel.state.gov/indonesia_warning.html), the world's most populous Muslim nation? True, the U.S. State Department continues to advise all nonessential travel to Indonesia be deferred, but one could argue that Bali, a small Maui-shaped volcanic island between massive Java and tiny Lombok is a country unto itself and with good reason.

In a country of 238 million, Bali's three million residents are overwhelmingly Hindu and speak Balinese which is distinct from Bahasa Indonesia, the official language of the archipelago.



The island itself, crossed with rivers, dotted with active volcanoes and fringed with coral reefs and idyllic sandy beaches is nearly four times larger than Kaua'i.

A haven for artists, travelers and surfers since the 1930s, Bali came to be known as the tourist Mecca of Southeast Asia until a bomb blast in a Kuta beach disco claimed 203 lives in October 2002. Since then, business has been decidedly slower and the Balinese economy, previously one of the strongest in Indonesia, continues to struggle.

Visitors looking for sun, sand and surf head to long-established resorts like

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Sanur, Nusa Dua and Kuta, all a short drive from Ngurah Rai Airport and Bali's largest city, Denpasar, but if you're after something you can't find here on Kauai, check out Bali's cultural capital, Ubud.

By taxi, Ubud can be reached in less than an hour from the airport.

While recent growth and development have had an impact on what was a small country town surrounded by rice paddies, Ubud remains a laid back place offering plenty to see and do with a dizzying variety of accommodation, shops and eateries.

Interior design enthusiasts and gardeners will find no shortage of inspiration. Familiar tropical plants like heliconia, ginger, ti and plumeria are everywhere, with epiphytic ferns and orchids arching from palms and red hibiscus floating in lava rock pools or tucked into the trunk of an elephant-headed Ganesh statue.

A liberal use of bamboo, teak, terra cotta, sand stone and woven ikat and batik textiles create an exotic tropical feel which can easily be incorporated into any home in Hawaii.

In Ubud, whether you are staying in a suite at the posh Four Seasons Resort or at a simple family-run \$9 a night guest house, you can walk to the central market and Ubud Palace in the heart of town. Throughout Ubud pastoral scenes are played out in flat green rice paddies where farmers still plant by hand using cattle-drawn plows. Distances are short and, partly because of the lack of tourists since the Kuta bombing, finding a taxi is not a problem.

In fact, the taxis will find you.

Within hours of arriving in Ubud, you may begin to wonder if "transport?" is not the local greeting, the word being called out at every corner and doorstep.

This is, in fact, just an attempt by under-employed drivers and guides to drum up some much needed business. The "transport" call may be persistent, but never aggressive, and will soon be met with a smile if the would-be taxi fare flashes a smile and explains, "jalan jalan" (rough translation: just out for a stroll).

Generally, the Balinese are warm, accommodating, gentle and quick to smile. Diligent, hard working and seemingly universally talented, the people of Ubud appear busy, yet never hurried. From early morning they present daily offerings called canang which are small palm leaf trays filled with flower petals, betel nut, water and incense placed on the ground (to ward off evil) and on raised alters (for the gods). Many young Balinese remain deeply religious yet stylish, modern and trendy, managing to straddle old and new as Bali finds its way in the 21st century.

Balinese antiquity is found at two excellent examples of 11th century temple ruins, Goa Gaja "Elephant Cave" and Gunung Kawi, both easily visited as a day trip from Ubud. Likewise, Bali's highest volcano, Gunung Agung and nearby Gunung Batur which most recently erupted in 1999 along with scenic Batur lake below, are just northeast of Ubud.

Within Ubud itself there are jungle hikes along the rivers that cut impossibly deep ravines through town and, for the more domesticated, visit an inexhaustible number of small craft workshops, furniture factories, wood carving centers, art galleries, museums and antique shops in and around town. If all that walking wears you out, there are countless spas offering everything from reflexology to herbal scalp massage to mandi susu (soaking in a milk bath).

And while Ubud is not known for its night life (go to Kuta for that), it is a wonderful place to experience traditional Balinese dances like Kecak, Barong, Legong Keraton and Kebyar which are performed nightly in rotation, usually in dramatic settings such as the lotus pond beside Saraswati temple.

Behold this tropical island paradise, somehow so familiar, yet completely unlike home. Just across the water, on the other side of the world, a tiny beautiful island and tourist destination on the rebound, here the scenic, spiritual and sensual converge on Indonesia's "Island of the Gods." So book your ticket and pack your bag, Bali awaits.

- If you go:
- Just south of the equator, Bali can be somewhat hotter and more humid than Hawaii and lacks cooling trade winds. The cooler dry season between April and October is the most comfortable time to visit.
- The Indonesian currency is the rupiah (currently about Rp.



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9,100 per one U.S. dollar). Money changers give the best exchange rates on clean, new 2001 series \$100 bills. 1996 series bills may fetch a slightly lower rate as will smaller denomination notes.

• Upon departure from Bali's Ngurah Rai Airport all passengers are charged a 100,000 rupiah (or \$13 U.S.) Passenger Service Charge (departure tax) before boarding international flights.

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