

# Bali

*The Balinese believe heaven looks much like their island. With blissful beaches, lush mountains and beautiful architecture, they could well be right. By Mark Eveleigh*

The haunting refrain of a temple prayer call echoes through the coconut palms as a tropical sun burnishes the rim of a towering volcano. Women clad in vibrant sarongs and kebaya blouses hurry along the street with offerings perched high on their heads.

Bali has long been renowned for its uniquely colourful culture. Unusual among the world's island dwellers, the Balinese traditionally turned their backs on the sea, choosing instead to look upwards, towards the peaks of their sacred mountains. The sea was considered to be unclean and unholy, so that even the fishermen chose to build their homes safely inland. Because of this the first tourists to arrive discovered a paradise where endless beachfront land was available, and very cheap.

For many modern visitors, a holiday on the island still revolves around glorious beaches. It is rare to find a holidaymaker, however, who is not also keen to travel beyond the beaches to experience day-to-day life on Indonesia's only majority Hindu island.

The cascading valleys and terraced paddy fields around Ubud are Bali's cultural heartlands. Ubud became a haven for European artists, writers and vagabond bohemians who were lured by a picture-perfect landscape, vibrant ceremonies and unspoiled rural life back in the 1930s. These days countless *boles* (foreigners) come to live the Bali dream in a karmic boomtown that has become one of the world's capitals for yoga and healthy living.

When Made Gunarta co-founded the Yoga Barn (00 62 3619 71407; theyogabarn.com) in 2006 it was the only venue in Ubud built specifically for yoga. Now Made's hometown boasts dozens of retreats and hosts the Bali Spirit Festival (00 62 3619 70992; balispiritfestival.com) every April.

"They say that the name Ubud came from an old Balinese word meaning 'place of healing,'" Made says. "That's really what Ubud has always been."

Indonesia is the world's biggest island nation, with an estimated 13,465 islands. Bali, which has a total area smaller than Devon, is the most popular among tourists, although



many of the outlying rural regions and wilderness areas of this incredibly diverse island are often overlooked by visitors.

Reaching Bali from the UK has always required at least one change of planes, but this summer Emirates (0344 800 2777; emirates.com) added a new one-stop option, connecting six UK airports to the island, via Dubai – Heathrow, Gatwick, Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow and Newcastle.

Cox & Kings (0207 873 5000; coxandkings.co.uk) offers a 14-day private tour combining the best of Bali & Java, priced from £2,595 per person including flights, transfers and excursions, B&B and some other meals.

Asia specialist Backyard Travel (00 800 22259273; backyardtravel.com) has an action-packed 10-day guided tour around Bali, with half-board accommodation, starting at £469 per person, excluding flights. And Intrepid Travel (0808 274 5111; intrepidtravel.com) offers a nine-day Beautiful Bali trip starting from £585 per person, including accommodation, some meals, transport and a local guide. Flights are extra.

The Balinese believe that when they die, heaven will look very much like their island. Take time to explore beyond the usual tourist trail and you're sure to come to the conclusion that they're very probably right.



Hill start: Bali's verdant paddy fields  
ISTOCKPHOTO:GIWIMAKEBROKER/REX

## Central Bali

Ubud, spiritual heartland of the island of the gods, is a popular day trip. It lies across a range of dramatic jungle valleys and paddy fields, but even its bustling town-centre captivates visitors. Bali to Bali Tours (00 62 812 395 6828; balitobali.com) runs a

range of customised day trips such as a cultural visit to Ubud that takes in the Monkey Forest, Ubud Palace, Taman Ayun (Royal Temple) and sunset at Tanah Lot. From 450,000 rupiahs (£21) for up to three people, with an English-speaking driver/guide.

Soul-searchers also flock here on *Eat, Pray Love*-style yoga and health escapes. Among the numerous high-end properties offering detox retreats and treatments are Fivelements Resort (00 62 3614 69260; fivelements.org); Four Seasons Resort Bali at

Sayan, and Mandapa, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve (see "Where to stay", overleaf, for more on the latter two).

In recent years the dramatic landscape around Ubud has also attracted adrenaline junkies with everything from rafting to cycling,

trekking, quad-biking and horse riding. Ayung River Rafting (00 62 851 01 506060; ayungriverrafting.net) is a local outfit offering numerous adventurous activities. Basic rafting packages start at US\$39pp (£26) for a minimum of two people taking part.

## South coast

Once considered the desert badlands, the relatively dry peninsula south of the airport is now Bali's premier haven for sun-worshippers. Nusa Dua is where many of the island's most exclusive resorts are. Visitors are able to get their culture fix with sunset trips to the breathtakingly beautiful Uluwatu cliff-top temple. The great stretch of beach at Jimbaran has its own share of prestigious properties and is perfectly placed for the airport and for trips to the Bukit Peninsula and mainland.

In recent decades the backpacker and budget traveller zone of Kuta has sprawled up the coast into Legian. Further west, Seminyak and Canggu now offer hundreds of designer villas and stylish retreats at very competitive prices, such as IZE Seminyak (00 62 36184 66999; ize-seminyak.com) which has rooms starting at just US\$85 (£57), room only. All of these areas access world-class beaches, and even much-maligned palm-fringed Kuta (right) surprises visitors used to the high-rise concrete jungles of the Med.



Uluwatu is famed for one of the best waves on our planet, there are world-class surf-spots on Bukit (Belangan, Padang Padang, Balangan, Green Bow) and on the main island itself (Kuta Reef, Legian, Canggu, Keramas, Medewi). Bali Surf Tours

(00 62 8123815180; bali surf-tours.com) can arrange day trips or multi-day "surfaris" anywhere on the island from US\$65 (£42)pp. Surfboard rental is an extra US\$10 (£6.40), and accompanying non-surfers can tag along for US\$10 (£6.40)pp.

## Wild west

Bali's "wild west" is blessed with mile upon mile of deserted volcanic black sand beaches, jungles, paddies and a timeless island life-style that, even today, is rarely seen by outsiders.

West Bali National Park, which covers most of the western end of the island, remains a mystery even to many native islanders. It is almost inconceivable that an area of virtually unexplored jungle, half the size of the Isle of Wight, could lie just

a three-hour drive from Bali's international airport. Even more surprising is the fact that it is home to some of the most prolific wildlife in South-east Asia, including four types of deer, two species of monkey and countless birds such as hornbills and the extremely rare Bali starling (right).

There's virtually no tourism infrastructure in the park but Puri Dajuma Beach Eco-resort (00 62 811 388709; dajuma.com), near Medewi, can



arrange customised treks, and even camping expeditions. The resort has lovely beachfront bungalows from US\$228 (£152) a night, room only.

Medewi surf point is Bali's longest wave and this little beach strip is gaining a reputation as a quiet and restful retreat for surfers – and, increasingly, yoga aficionados – people who crave something more fulfilling than their regular hangouts around Kuta and Ubud.

## North coast

While surfers gather along the south coast, Bali's north shore is paradise for divers (right). Amed lies in unexpectedly arid cactus-country in the rain-shadow at the foot of Agung volcano. But the crystalline clarity of its waters guarantees world-class reef and wreck dives.

There are several respected dive schools here including Ecodive Bali (00 62 363 23482; ecodivebali.com) and even a free-diving and yoga centre, Apnea Bali (00 62 822661 25814; apneabali.com), where you can learn to dive unencumbered with breathing apparatus.

Countless visitors set out every morning from

the fishing town of Lovina in *jukung* outriggers, keen to catch sight of leaping pods of up to 100 dolphins, but Menjangan Island is often described as Bali's dive-spot par excellence. The Menjangan resort (00 62 362 94700; themenjan.com) offers dive tours around the island from US\$145pp (£97), a price that includes equipment hire and guides.

Budget diving day trips can cost as little as 500,000 Indonesian rupiahs (£24) if you ask around the dive-shops in Pemuteran village (near the jetty from where boats depart for Menjangan).

