

Escape

Bali. The name alone evokes tranquility, wanderlust, excitement and romantic visions of an exotic land blessed with eternal natural beauty and time-honored culture. Rising between the Indian Ocean and the Bali Sea, the island in the heart of the Indonesian archipelago has evolved as a global hotspot for sun-drenched bliss and cultural tourism—a honeymoon destination, a bucket-list vacation, a must-see on the Southeast Asia tourist trail.

But unlike the untouched Bali of the 1970s, when tourism commenced along its densely forested volcanic beaches, today's Bali

Storybook Bali

Despite globalization, the natural beauty and rich cultural heritage of Bali's rustic east and interior remain intact

BY PAUL RUBIO

Escape



SCENES AT AMANKILA, COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A ROMANTIC HILLTOP DAYBED; THE STUNNING, THREE-TIERED, CLIFFSIDE POOL; THE BEACH CLUB.



SCENES FROM RURAL BALI, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: RICE PADDIES; WOMEN STROLL ALONG ROADSIDES, BALANCING BUCKETS OF FRUIT ON THEIR HEADS; THE TEMPLE OF BESAKIH.



is a dichotomous world. For village elders, the island is hardly recognizable in its highly globalized southernmost reaches. This area, unofficially dubbed “New Bali,” consists of the southern mainland and a small peninsula housing populated and touristy regions like Nusa Dua, Legian and Seminyak. It is here where the majority of high-end tourism development continues, often delivering show-stopping resorts that serve as self-contained destinations.

However, limiting a journey to New Bali forgoes the essence of Southeast Asia’s island gem—“Traditional Bali.” Found along the island’s east coast and deep in its interior, this region captures Bali’s timeless spirit. Far removed from the chaos of modernity, travelers lose themselves in the hospitality of daily village life, the rewarding treks through rice fields, the burgeoning indigenous arts and craft scene and the *odalan* ceremonies held at temples. This is the Bali of fairy tales.

THE RUSTIC EAST

Beyond Bali’s resort-strewn south, frenetic traffic gives way to isolated roads bordered by stacked rice terraces and lush jungle. Scenes of village life usurp the fast-food



and motorcycle calamity. Circumventing the eastern coastline towards the traditional villages of Manggis, Candidasa and Tenganan Pegriingsingan, colossal vines and palm trees vie for space along dramatic cliffsides. Secluded beaches usher in the rising tides from the Lombok Strait.

Navigating this shoreline feels like a journey back in time. Women stroll along roadsides, balancing buckets of *salak* (snake fruit) on their heads, and children weave delicate floral arrangements called *banten canang* as religious offerings for life-cycle ceremonies. The colors, smiles and sounds are vibrantly expressive. Many of these traditional scenes stem from the Balinese devotion to their own version of Hinduism—*Agama Hindu Dharma*. This fidelity has resulted in an island known for “1,000 temples” (though there are likely more), none more important than the eleventh-century Mother Temple of Besakih, the inspiration



THE COOKING SCHOOL (BELOW) AND PRINCIPAL SWIMMING POOL (RIGHT) AT UMA UBUD; A 2-BEDROOM RETREAT VILLA (RIGHT) AT COMO SHAMBHALA.

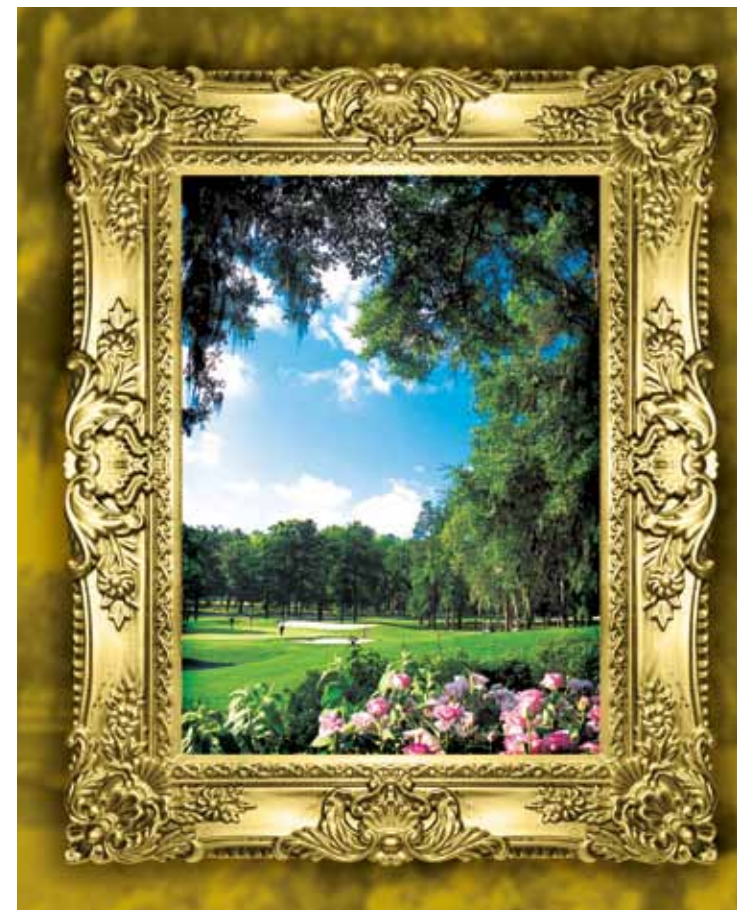


An early morning sunrise trek to picturesque Gumang Hill or a snorkeling cruise aboard *Aman XII* is complemented by an afternoon of spa treatments and a beachside private candlelit dinner. Likewise, a full afternoon of exploring villages, visiting re-owned water palaces and bargaining in local markets often begins with a picnic breakfast on top of the world at one of Amankila’s romantic satellite bales (hilltop, covered daybeds) and later ends with a *rijsttafel* dinner, a 10-course Indonesian dining extravaganza.

THE RICH INTERIOR

Coastal beauty notwithstanding, Bali’s rich interior is the pinnacle of the island’s exotic appeal and ethnic grandeur. The city of Ubud

and its proximate villages showcase the island’s living culture, where artists interpret the modernization of traditional living, esteemed Balinese architecture abounds, village elders trek through the gates of mountaintop luxury hotels to fetch holy water from the temples below and the Agung River breathes life into all that grows around her. A seamless amalgamation of alternating levels of dense forest and rice terraces, this is the Bali of legends.



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In Ubud, one can reside in either the heart of the cultural action or the jungle surrounds. The centrally located luxury boutique hotel Uma by COMO (comohotels.com/umaubud) sits near the city's prolific arts scene. Here, visitors can easily access renowned yoga centers, cooking schools and convivial villages where healers, wood carvers and silversmiths carry on the

customs of generations past. Farther afield, the COMO Shambhala Estate (comohotels.com/comoshambhalaestate) is the evergreen of Ubud inspiration and enlightenment. In addition to private villas, rooms and suites, accommodations include five luxury residences and five retreat villas, each with motifs like fire, water and Earth reflected in high design.



ALFRESCO DINING AND HEART-HEALTHY MEALS, LIKE THIS TIGER PRAWN, BABY CARROT AND BABY BEAN SALAD (LEFT), ARE PART OF THE COMO SHAMBHALA EXPERIENCE.

Organized as three-, five- and seven-day wellness programs, the personal sojourn at

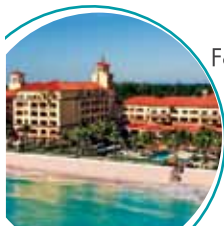
COMO Shambhala Estate begins with a consultation from the in-house Ayurvedic doctor, who prepares a bespoke itinerary for time spent at the property. Days alternate between spa treatments, hilltop yoga and Pilates classes, jungle treks and unapologetic relaxation interspersed by guiltless indulgence in innovative organic meals and juices. The suggested structure leaves ample time for a cathartic journey of self—time to get lost around the 23-acre estate and explore the natural spring pools hugging the mountain's edge. Here, you can delight in the sounds and sights of nature at the riverbank, ponder personal achievement and test physical fitness at the bona fide "jungle gym."

It seems ironic an island celebrated for its coastal majesty boasts some of its greatest treasures inland. In fact, Bali's fortunes are everywhere—distributed over its vast volcanoes, lush mountains, and remote and crowded beaches, where timeless villages and five-star resorts co-exist. This multifaceted island has evolved as a land of diverse escapism, be that adventure, relaxation or self-reflection, amid living history and natural wonder. ◀◀



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