



Fields of dreams:
Mount Agung
and terraced rice
paddies in the
Sidemen valley

GREEN PEACE

The name may whisper like a remote tropical breeze, yet Bali can be busy, built-up and a bit of a let-down. Paradise is not lost, though — far from it. **Liz Edwards** falls for the lush beauty of the island's verdant hills, empty shores and kind local souls



Get your violins out: my husband made me go to Bali. I know, I know; the three-line whip really shouldn't have been necessary. On paper, Bali should have been topping my bucket list. I haven't yet found a corner of Asia I don't like, and this one, Indonesia's star island, comes brimming with ancient Hindu temples, spicy food, delightful people, dreamy scenery and dramatic coastline. Yoga fans love it, surfers love it, even educated beach-bunnies love it; it's many things to many people. But maybe that was my problem. It's many things to too many people. A quick chat with my inner snob confirmed that Bali's popularity was what was putting me off. Couldn't we get an Asia fix elsewhere, I asked? Not if we wanted somewhere new, and easy for our three-year-old, and didn't want to drip our way round, replied Les – Bali's late monsoon means it sunbathes while other bits of Asia squelch. So I let him book, on one condition: he had to find us the crowd-pleasing bits, without the crowds. That's quite a condition, it turns out. Crawling through traffic in Bali's Kuta tourist area on the first day of our fortnight's exploration, I ask our driver if it's always this slow. 'You think this is slow?' he laughs. 'Sometimes the airport road's so jammed, it's quicker to walk into town.' First step, then, is leaving Kuta, however slowly. The beach gives good sunset, but it's backed by an ugly westernised sprawl – an M&S, a Bubba Gump

MONSOON MONTHS
 Bali's rainy season usually begins in October (and lasts until March), whereas Vietnam and Thailand are wet between May and November

Shrimp Co – that makes me itch. 'This isn't Bali,' says our driver. 'See?' says Les. Thirty kilometres up the coast from Kuta, between mountain-view fields and wave-thumped sands, Soori Bali is another story. Actually, this sleek villa-hotel probably isn't quite Bali, either (too groomed and efficient), but it's a darn sight closer and it's serenely peaceful. Cue sighs of relief all round. Of course, it's easy to ditch the crowds when you can hide in a posh villa with room service and private pool. ('Don't jump in from the bedroom,' cautions the butler, while sliding open the doors perfectly positioned for doing just that.) And we can spy a little local life playing out on the beach below: ladies burying themselves to bake in the hot black sand; men standing in the shallows with fishing nets; a jingly, drum-beating procession that turns out to be a passing funeral. But we're not really testing the crowd-avoidance thing until we leave the hotel gates next morning on bikes. And we pass with flying colours. Pedalling around nearby villages and fields with Mustana, the hotel's immaculate cycling guide, we plug instantly into the rural peace. We see no other tourists, only neatly uniformed kids mopedding home from school, farmers rotovating their fields, shopkeepers lazing in the shade. Away from the pounding surf, the noisiest thing we hear is the happy-shouty-chatter that signals 'primary school' the world over. But what's unique is the very physical

manifestation of the island's Hindu beliefs, and not just the little plates of foodie-floral offerings we see in every doorway. Mustana points out the temples within each family compound; bigger, curly-roofed communal temples sit between the compounds; and even the plots of spinach, watermelon and aubergine out in the fields are punctuated with mini shrines. Is nothing *not* sacred? High above it all hover dozens of kites, humming in the breeze, anchored by posts or hands too distant to see. 'What do the kites symbolise?' I ask Mustana solemnly. 'It's kite season,' he says. 'They're for fun!' Back at the hotel, Mustana helps our son make his own kite, using a glowing joss stick to weld polythene around a bamboo-and-string frame, and we take it to the beach, kicking up soft charcoal sand as we send it soaring. Just along the coast is Pura Tanah Lot, one of Bali's most important temples, perched photogenically on coastal rocks – and a magnet for Kuta day trippers. Kryptonite! Can we swerve it? Yes, we can, says Les, because en route to Munduk, the next base in our dodge-the-masses tour, is Pura Luhur Batukau, another major temple, but one that's safely off the beaten track. We head north across the island through leafy villages, many elaborate with bamboo and palm-leaf decorations for ceremonies timed to coincide with the new moon. Pura Luhur Batukau itself is a collection of shrines and tall, tiered-thatch *merus* (pagodas) surrounded by forests ►

BALINESE WORSHIPPERS OUTNUMBER TOURISTS. PRIESTS CHANT, BELLS TING, FOUNTAINS TINKLE. WE TINGLE

Wing and a prayer: from left, kite-flying on the beach; devotional statue at Pura Luhur Batukau; temple dancer in Ubud



thick with palms, bamboo and hibiscus on the misty foothills of Mount Batukau. Temple rules vary around the island, but here they're strict: no women during pregnancy or periods, no children with baby teeth, no one 'getting impure due to death'. So we borrow sarongs, leave our baby-toothed son playing I-spy with Ferry, the driver, and step through the Yin-Yang split gates into the temple precincts, all mottled, mossy stone carvings and liberally scattered offerings. Actual Balinese worshippers outnumber tourists, and there's a hold-your-breath atmosphere of quiet reverence. Priests chant, bells ting, sacred water fountains tinkle. We tingle.

'See?' says Les.

Via the luminous emerald hillsides of the Unesco-protected Jatiluwih rice paddies (stunning, but crowd-wise definitely on the spectrum), we continue north to Munduk, high above Bali's triplet volcanic lakes. Enough tourists have made it here that all along the ridge overlooking the lakes, enterprising restaurateurs have gilded the view with giant selfie props: a swing, a couple-sized woven heart, a bamboo helicopter to pose in. It's just as well our tour operator has given us a guide, Kadek, who knows his brief. We spend the next couple of days off-piste, exploring coffee plantations, fields of blue hydrangeas destined for offerings, and hidden jungle waterfalls. Banyumala, a 15-minute scramble down a steep tree-root-stepped path, is a spectacularly lush 40m-high cascade, where we have only the swallows

WRITER'S TIP
Bring your own cotton sarong (or buy one for a couple of pounds in a market) and you won't have to wrap your legs in the sweaty synthetic numbers many temples lend visitors

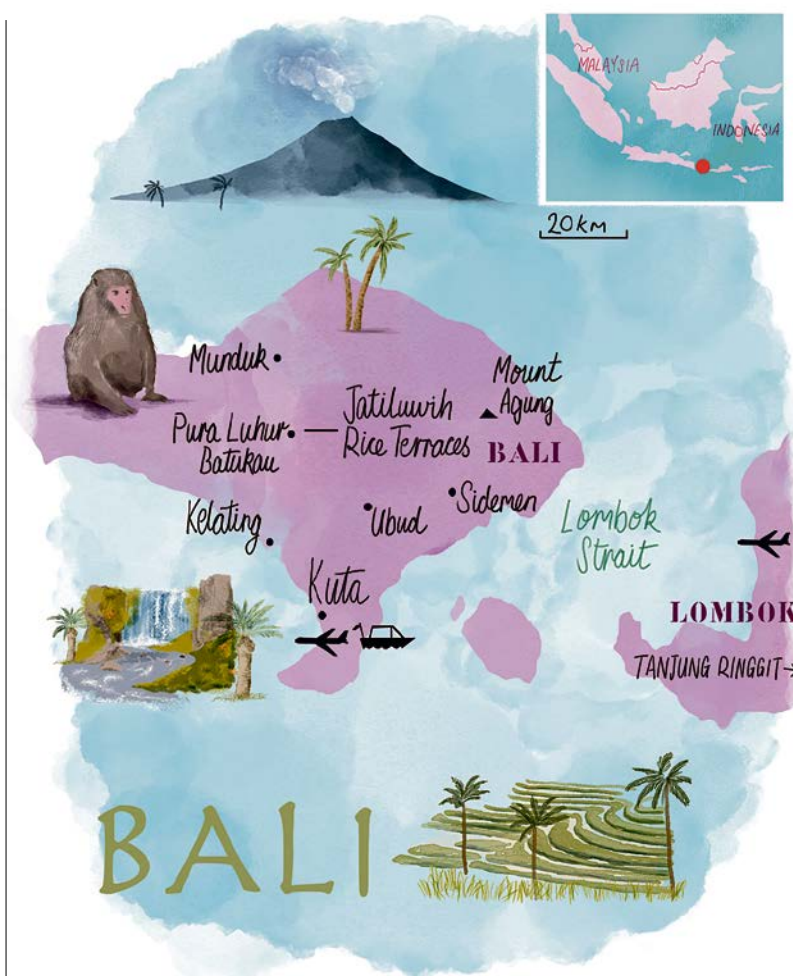
Against the grain: clockwise from left, a rice field on Ubud's outskirts. Above, Pink Beach, near Jeeva Beloam on Lombok; Ubud's Sacred Monkey Forest; offerings made with hydrangea petals

and dragonflies for company – though of course we're not the first here. It wouldn't be Bali without a shrine.

Our Marlene Dietrich act is coming on so well, we risk a stop at Pura Ulun Danu Beratan on our way out of the mountains. The 'floating' temple on Lake Beratan must have graced a million brochure shots, but the mid-morning visitor-swarmed reality is more theme park than ethereal. We definitely *want* to be alone now – in which case we're heading for the wrong place; Ubud has been a victim of *Eat, Pray, Love* success. But we couldn't ignore it, says Les. The town is Bali's cultural capital, home to (child-pleasing) dancers and musicians, (wife-pleasing) artists and craftsmen, all part of what makes Bali unique.

So we're prepared for busy: the traffic oozes at Kuta pace; the town's low-rise centre heaves with tie-dye trousers, fish pedicures, wooden willies, air-conned Western boutiques and ticket touts; and the Sacred Monkey Forest temple is thronged with visitors ignoring the 'Do not feed the macaques' signs and taking photos, even around the open-air, industrial-blowtorch cremation that's going on. (Kadek's aunt, he mentions, casually. The Balinese are pretty relaxed about death, he says. 'We'll cry a little because we can't be together any more, but really, we're happy she is with the gods. We are just puppets in this life.')

But the density of visitors in Ubud only makes it more pleasantly surprising when we do spend a day of blissful tranquillity in the countryside nearby. Our tour company >



Supernatural: above, Munduk's Banyumala waterfall. Opposite, local boys tuck into chicken satay in Ubud; serene Soori Bali villa resort

MOUNT AGUNG LETS HER SHAWL OF CLOUDS SLIP DOWN FOR A COQUETTISH SHOULDER-REVEAL, BUT KEEPS HER TEMPER FOR NOW

has set us up with Ida Bagus Ketut Dharma. A village priest who leads nature walks and is one of the last practitioners of traditional Keliki painting, he encompasses many of Bali's best bits in one charismatic, dimple-cheeked package. We set off through rice paddies that aren't as neat or scenically arranged as those at Jatiluwih, but it's the same chlorophyll-drenched riot of greens, and with not a single minibus in sight, they feel more real. They're there for the people who farm them, not for tourist show.

Butterflies and dragonflies dance as Ida explains about different types of rice, points out the white egrets that help by eating bugs, and pauses to chat to a barefoot farmer resting on an irrigation channel wall. He learnt about medicinal plants from his grandfather, and shows us starflowers (their sap makes good eyedrops), *mooluk* leaves (shampoo substitute) and *kopido* leaves (antiseptic that's good for 'sickle wounds', gulp).

Palms and banana trees give us shade before we plunge into a steep gorge, over a wobbly bamboo bridge and back up the other side through teak, ebony and mahogany trees. It's sweaty work, but the pastoral peace is soothing – as is the spread of salads, sambals, rice and spicy chicken Ida's wife gives us back at his family compound. We buy a couple of his fantastically intricate paintings, he gives us a priestly blessing – and we're off, reluctantly breaking the spell for our son's benefit with a rowdy, panto-like *kecak* dance show back in central Ubud.

The crowdometer has been creeping dangerously high, but Les has further splendid isolation up his sleeve. First,

to Sidemen, the sleepy eastern region known for its intricate ikat-weaving and mountain-trekking. It's slightly less sleepy than normal when we arrive, though, because Mount Agung, the highest of Bali's volcanic peaks, seems to be waking up. Pre-empting an eruption, a government exclusion zone extends kilometres from her summit (and still does now) – which cuts off a couple of places we meant to visit, but adds a little 'cloud or ash?' frisson to our hotel's gorgeously verdant view (maybe less so for the hundreds of Balinese displaced from their villages). We let Kadek persuade us into one more temple, Pura Bukit Tegeh.

It's not the prettiest or most ornate we've seen, but many offerings suggest the locals aren't deterred by the 300-plus steps up. And it has the best view – of rice terraces, rivers and Mount Agung herself. As we watch, she lets her shawl of clouds slip down for a coquettish shoulder-reveal, then covers herself up again, keeping her temper for now.

Our final bid for seclusion is a bit of a cheat, because we hop across the sea to Bali's neighbour, Lombok. It's definitely quieter (no traffic jams!) and it's refreshing to observe everyday life without feeling part of its focus. Really, though, we're here for the beaches, which we've heard knock Bali's into a cocked hat. We've only seen a couple on Bali but I can believe Lombok's trump the lot when we reach Jeeva Beloam, our beach-camp hotel in the deep southeast, and clock its cornflour-soft sand and cornflower-blue waves. It's perfect for castaway fantasists and crowd-avoiders like us. And yet, could it be... too quiet? '...' says Les. ■

PHOTOGRAPHS: TZBRC.COM, ALAMY, AWIL IMAGES, GETTY, ROBERT HARDING, SUPERSTOCK

Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

Go independent

The quickest way from London to Bali is with **Singapore Airlines** (about 16.5 hours), which has Heathrow returns, via Singapore, from £605. **Garuda Indonesia** flies from Heathrow, via Jakarta, from £453 return, or **Emirates** has daily returns, via Dubai, from six UK airports, from £569. Garuda also flies Bali-Lombok three times a day, from £25 one-way.

Go packaged

Asia specialist **Experience Travel Group** (experiencetravelgroup.com/) has great local knowledge of Bali and Lombok. A two-week tailor-made trip, including Munduk, Ubud, Sidemen and Lombok starts at £2,698pp, B&B, with transport, activities and Heathrow flights. **Intrepid Travel** (intrepidtravel.com) has several small-group trips to Indonesia, such as the 15-day Bali & Lombok Adventure, with time in Ubud, Munduk and Sidemen. It starts at £1,867pp, B&B, including transport, most activities and Gatwick flights.

Where to stay

Kuta: If you need a night near the airport, **Amnaya** is a stylish haven in busy Kuta, with a great pool (amnayahotels.com; doubles from £72, B&B). **Kelating:** **Soori Bali** (sooribali.com) has suites from £523, B&B. **Munduk:** You'll see incredible sunsets from the gorgeous infinity pool at **Munduk Moding Plantation**, a hotel in a working coffee plantation (mundukmodingplantation.com; doubles from £122, B&B). **Ubud:** Just north of town, peaceful **Jannata Resort** has large rooms – and many steps (jannataresort.com; doubles from £100, room only). **Sidemen:** At beautiful thatch-roofed **Surya Shanti Villa**, you get a foot massage with your welcome drink (suryashantivilla.com; doubles from £103, B&B). **Tanjung Ringgit:** **Jeeva Beloam** (jeevaresorts.com/beloam) has luxurious thatched beach huts from £249, full board.

Further information

See the official tourist board website, indonesia.travel. You'll find extensive, frank info on Bali at travelfish.org.