

Island of The Gods

Information about Bali

Bali, the famed Island of the Gods, with its varied landscape of hills and mountains, rugged coastlines and sandy beaches, lush rice terraces and barren volcanic hillsides all providing a picturesque backdrop to its colourful, deeply spiritual and unique culture, stakes a serious claim to be paradise on earth. With world-class surfing and diving, a large number of cultural, historical and archaeological attractions, and an enormous range of accommodations, this is one of the world's most popular island destinations and one which consistently wins travel awards. Bali has something to offer a very broad market of visitors from young back-packers right through to the super-rich.

Bali is one of more than 17,000 islands in the Indonesian archipelago and is located just over 2 kilometres (almost 1.5 miles) from the eastern tip of the island of Java and west of the island of Lombok. The island, home to about 4 million people, is approximately 144 kilometres (90 miles) from east to west and 80 kilometres (50 miles) north to south.

The word "paradise" is used a lot in Bali and not without reason. The combination of friendly, hospitable people, a magnificently visual culture infused with spirituality and (not least) spectacular beaches with great surfing and diving have made Bali Indonesia's unrivaled number one tourist attraction. Eighty percent of international visitors to Indonesia visit Bali and Bali alone.

The popularity is not without its flip sides- like many places in the island's South, once paradisiacal Kuta has degenerated into a congested warren of concrete, touts and scammers extracting a living by overcharging tourists. The island's visibility has also drawn the unwanted attention of terrorists in 2002 and 2005; however Bali has managed to retain its magic. Bali is a wonderful destination with something for everyone, and though heavily travelled, it is still easy to find some peace and quiet, if you like. Avoid the South of the island if you want a more traditional and genuine Balinese experience.

A consideration is the tourist season and Bali can get very crowded in August and September and again at Christmas and New Year. Australians also visit during school holidays in early April, late June and late September, while domestic tourists from elsewhere in Indonesia visit during national holidays.

History

The first Hindus arrived in Bali as early as 100 BC, but the unique culture which is so apparent to any current day visitor to Bali hails largely from neighbouring Java, with some influence from Bali's distant animist past. The Javanese Majapahit Empire's rule over Bali became complete in the 14th century when Gajah Mada, Prime Minister of the Javanese king, defeated the Balinese king at Bedulu.

The rule of the Majapahit Empire resulted in the initial influx of Javanese culture, most of all in architecture, dance, painting, sculpture and the wayang puppet theatre. All of this is still very apparent today. The very few Balinese who did not adopt this Javanese Hindu culture are known today as the Bali Aga ("original Balinese") and still live in the isolated villages of Tenganan near Candidasa and Trunyan on the remote eastern shore of Lake Batur at Kintamani.

With the rise of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, the Majapahit Empire in Java fell and Bali became independent near the turn of the 16th century. The Javanese aristocracy found refuge in Bali, bringing an even stronger influx of Hindu arts, literature and religion.

Divided among a number of ruling rajas, occasionally battling off invaders from now Islamic Java to the west and making forays to conquer Lombok to the east, the north of the island was finally captured by the Dutch colonialists in a series of brutal wars from 1846 to 1849. Southern Bali was not conquered until 1906, and eastern Bali did not surrender until 1908. In both 1906 and 1908, many Balinese chose death over disgrace and fought en-masse until the bitter end, often walking straight into Dutch cannons and gunfire. This manner of suicidal fighting to the death is known as puputan. Victory was bittersweet, as the images of the puputan highly tarnished the Dutch in the international community. Perhaps to make up for this, the Dutch did not make the Balinese enter into

a forced cultivation system, as had happened in Java, and instead tried to promote Balinese culture through their policy of Baliseering or the "Balinisation of Bali".

Bali became part of the newly independent Republic of Indonesia in 1945. In 1965, after the failed coup d'etat which was allegedly backed by the Communist Party (PKI), state-instigated, anti-communist violence spread across Indonesia. In Bali, it has been said that the rivers ran red with the reprisal killings of suspected communists—most estimates of the death toll say 80,000, or about five percent of the population of Bali at the time.

The current chapter in Bali's history began in the seventies when intrepid hippies and surfers discovered Bali's beaches and waves, and tourism soon became the biggest income earner. Despite the shocks of the terrorist attacks in 2002 and 2005, the magical island continues to draw crowds, and Bali's culture remains as spectacular as ever.

Regions

South Bali (Kuta, Bukit eninsula, Canggu, Denpasar, Jimbaran, Legian, Nusa Dua, Sanur, Seminyak, Tanah Lot)

The most visited part of the island by far, with Kuta Beach and chic Seminyak.

Central Bali (Ubud, Bedugul, Tabanan)

The cultural heart of Bali and the central mountain range.

West Bali (Negara, Gilimanuk, Medewi Beach, Pemuteran, West Bali National Park)
Ferries to Java and the West Bali National Park.

North Bali (Lovina, Singaraja)

Quiet black sand beaches and the old capital city.

East Bali (Amed, Besakih, Candidasa, Kintamani, Klungkung, Mount Agung, Padang Bai, Tirta Gangga)

Laid back coastal villages, an active volcano and the mighty Mount Agung.

Southeastern Islands (Nusa Lembongan, Nusa Penida, Nusa Ceningan)

Quiet off shore islands in the southeast, popular for diving activities.

Culture

Unlike any other island in largely Muslim Indonesia, Bali is a pocket of Hindu religion and culture. Every aspect of Balinese life is suffused with religion, but the most visible signs are the tiny offerings (canang sari, or sesajen) found in every Balinese house, work place, restaurant, souvenir stall and airport check-in desk. These leaf trays are made daily and can contain an enormous range of offering items: flowers, glutinous rice, cookies, salt, and even cigarettes and coffee! They are set out with burning incense sticks and sprinkled with holy water no less than three times a day, before every meal. Don't worry if you step on one, as they are placed on the ground for this very purpose and will be swept away anyway (But you better not step on one on purpose, because - as Balinese believe - it'll give you bad luck!).

Balinese Hinduism diverged from the mainstream well over 500 years ago and is quite radically different from what you would see in India. The primary deity is Sanghyang Widi Wasa (Acintya), the "all-in-one god" for which other gods like Vishnu (Wisnu) and Shiva (Civa) are merely manifestations, and instead of being shown directly, he is depicted by an empty throne wrapped in the distinctive poleng black-and-white chessboard pattern and protected by a ceremonial tedung umbrella.

The Balinese are master sculptors, and temples and courtyards are replete with statues of gods and goddesses like Dewi Sri, the goddess of rice and fertility, as well as guardians and protecting demons like toothy Rakasa, armed with a club. These days, though, entire villages like Batubulan have twigged onto the tourist potential and churn out everything imaginable from Buddhas to couples entwined in acrobatic poses for the export market.

Balinese dance and music are also justly famous and a major attraction for visitors to the island. As on neighbouring Java, the gamelan orchestra and wayang kulit shadow puppet theatre predominate. Dances are extremely visual and dramatic, and the most famous include:

Barong or "lion dance"- a ritual dance depicting the fight between good and evil, with performers wearing fearsome lion-like masks. This dance is often staged specifically for tourists as it is one of the most visually spectacular and the storyline is relatively easy to follow. Barong dance performances are not hard to find.

Calonarang- a spectacular dance which is a tale of combating dark magic and exorcising the evil spirits aligned with the witch-queen Rangda. The story has many variations and rarely are two calonarang plays the same. If you can find an authentic Calonarang performance, then you are in for a truly magical experience.

Kecak or "monkey dance"- actually invented in the 1930s by resident German artist Walter Spies for a movie but a spectacle nonetheless, with up to 250 dancers in concentric circles chanting "kecak kekak", while a performer in the centre acts out a spiritual dance. An especially popular Kecak dance performance is staged daily at Uluwatu Temple.

Legong Keraton- perhaps the most famous and feted of all Balinese dances. Performed by young girls, this is a dance of divine nymphs hailing from 12th century Java. Try to find an authentic Legong Keraton with a full-length performance. The short dance performances often found in tourist restaurants and hotels are usually extracts from the Legong Keraton.

Festivals

There are an estimated 20,000 temples (pura) on the island, each of which holds festivals (odalan) at least twice yearly. With many other auspicious days throughout the year there are always festivities going on.

The large island-wide festivals are determined by two local calendars. The 210 day wuku or Pawukon calendar is completely out of sync with the western calendar, meaning that it rotates wildly throughout the year. The lunar saka(caka) calendar roughly follows the western year.

Funerals (pitra yadnya) are another occasion of pomp and ceremony, when the deceased (often several at a time) are ritually cremated in extravagantly colorful rituals (ngaben).

Galungan is a 10 day festival which comes around every 210 days and celebrates the death of the tyrant Mayadenawa. Gods and ancestors visit earth and are greeted with gift-laden bamboo poles called penjor lining the streets. The last day of the festival is known as Kuningan.

Nyepi, or the **Hindu New Year**, also known as the day of absolute silence, is usually in March or April (next on March 21, 2015). If you are in Bali in the days preceding Nyepi, you will see amazing colorful giants (ogoh ogoh) being created by every banjar. On the eve of Nyepi, the ogoh ogoh are paraded through the streets, an amazing sight which is not to be missed. There are good reasons to avoid Nyepi as well, but for many visitors these will be outweighed by the privilege of experiencing such a unique festival. On Nyepi absolutely everything on the island is shut down between 6AM on the day of the new year and 6AM the following morning. Tourists are confined to their hotels and asked to be as quiet as possible for the day. After dark, light must be kept to a bare minimum. No one is allowed onto the beaches or streets. The only exceptions granted are for real emergency cases. The airport remains closed for the entire day, which means no flights into or out of Bali for 24 hr. Ferry harbours are closed as well. As the precise date of Nyepi changes every year, and isn't finally set until later in the year before, flights will be booked by airlines for this day in case you book early. When the date is set, and as it gets closer, the airlines will alter their bookings accordingly. This may mean that you have to alter your accommodation bookings if your flight has been bought forward or back to cater for Nyepi day.

All national public holidays in Indonesia apply in Bali, although Ramadan is naturally a much smaller event here than in the country's Muslim regions.

Climate

Daytime temperatures are pleasant, varying between 20-33 degree (68-93 F) year-round. From December to March, the west monsoon can bring heavy showers and high humidity, but days are still often sunny with the rains starting in the late afternoon or evening and passing quickly. From June to September, the humidity is low and it can be quite cool in the evenings. At this time of the year there is hardly any rain in the lowland coastal areas.

But be aware of flood along the beach from Tuban to Melasti (Kuta) because the drainage is not sufficient anymore in line with the development of occupying the land. The flood is not come in every year, but please don't stay in the ground floor, because the one to two hours flood can reach your knee on the road in front of your hotel.

Even when it is raining across most of Bali, you can often enjoy sunny, dry days on the Bukit Peninsulawhich receives far less rain than any other part of the island. On the other hand, in central Bali and in the mountains, you should not be surprised by cloudy skies and showers at any time of the year.

At higher elevations such as Bedugul or Kintamani, it gets distinctly chilly and you will need either a sweater or jacket after the sun sets.

Time zone

Bali is in the UTC+8 time zone (known in Indonesia as WITA, Waktu Indonesia Tengah), same as Western Australia, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and China and 1 hr ahead of Jakarta.

Visa

Visitors arriving in Bali by air from a point of origin outside Indonesia will be clearing customs and immigration at Bali's Ngurah Rai International Airport may require the purchase of a visa on arrival (VOA). The only type of visa on arrival. This may be extended later at the local Immigration office for a further once only period of up to 30 days. (The previous 7 day visa on arrival is no longer available). Exact change in dollars is recommended, although a selection of other major currencies including rupiah are accepted (usually displayed at the VOA counter), and any change will usually be given in rupiah. Credit cards are accepted in Bali (but don't count on the service working). Arriving passengers are passed through VOA (visa on arrival) issuance if applicable, then subsequently processed through immigration clearance channels for VOA, Non VOA (if the visa has been obtained prior to the time of departure), Visa waiver (for eligible nationalities) and a separate channel for Indonesian passport holders. Baggage retrieval is followed by customs and quarantine examinations including baggage X-ray checkpoints. The VOA and immigration clearance lines are integrated into several continuous lines; unlike the previous route where a passenger needed to line up at a VOA line and then to an immigration line.