

# THE ISLAND OF THE GODS

Bali's fame is disproportionate to its size, writes *Ellen Boonstra*, because there's a mystical quality in the air which has enthralled visitors for many years



Mythical carving at a Balinese temple

"People should get lost in Bali in order to find the true Bali," says Alex Margaronis, who runs a small resort called Taman Selini in Pemuteran, a sleepy fishing village in the more secluded northeastern tip of the island. Alex, who is of Greek-Indonesian heritage and grew up in Greece, relocated to Bali one year ago.

He contends that the mysticism of this Hindu enclave is what turns casual vacationers into repeat visitors. "People experience very vivid dreams and witness supernatural occurrences here," he says. "In the beginning, they only hear stories about this from the villagers. But even the most cynical of individuals, when they spend a bit more time here, soon begin to experience it for themselves. Bali is very famous for this - a lot of people come here for a vacation and never leave."

Travel writer Robin Sparks, who divides her time between Ubud, Turkey and her native San Francisco, echoes this sentiment. Robin thinks the healing and nurturing vibe is the reason so many travelers are drawn to Bali. "There is an energy here that attracts and holds people," she says. "I've lost count of how many people I've heard of who come for a short stay





The courtyard and grounds  
of the Ulun Danu Temple



The town was recently featured in the movie *Eat, Pray, Love* as the place where the main character, played by Julia Roberts, goes to seek spiritual guidance



Left: Dancers performing Legong, a classical Balinese dance  
Above: Visitor feeding a macaque in the Monkey Forest

and extend again and again.\* Like Alex, she attributes this to the spiritual nature of the locals, whose lives revolve around their metaphysical beliefs and regular offerings and trips to the temple. "There is definitely magic on the island - black and white."

Ubud is a well-known artists' colony up in the highlands of central Bali, which over the last couple of decades has transformed itself from a backpacker's haunt into Bali's art and spiritual centre, with a thriving expat community. The town was most recently featured in the movie *Eat, Pray, Love* as the place where the main character, played by Julia Roberts, goes to seek spiritual guidance.

The increasing popularity of the town has had its repercussions. Rents, for one, have quadrupled since Robin first set foot in Ubud in 2002 and are still going up. She's afraid the town is losing its easy-going, Bohemian vibe. "The rice paddies are getting covered over with expat villas faster than you can say *nasi goreng* [fried rice]," she laments. Coupled with the fact that the narrow roads cannot sustain the tour buses and increased traffic in the area, she added, "Many of us are already looking for the next Ubud."

Despite its heightened fame, Ubud manages to retain its charm. Considered Bali's art capital, visitors will revel in the town's abundance of galleries, art museums,



Girl selling batik which is part of ancient tradition of Bali

shops, markets and restaurants. The area is renowned for silver-smithing, woodcarving, batik and ikat textiles, while performances of traditional Balinese dance and shadow puppetry can also be enjoyed here. In the vicinity there are plenty of other attractions such as caves, ravines, a bird park and the much-visited Monkey Forest of Padang Tegal.

### Discovering Nature

Pemuteran is one of the rural villages found along Bali's northern coastline. The lush mountain range of West Bali National Park forms an idyllic backdrop for the resorts that line the main drag. No other part of Bali has such large stretches of protected beach and shallow coral reefs, making it a choice destination for snorkelers and scuba-divers all year round. (Which is not to downgrade

the many other scenic spots for swimming, surfing and diving, like the sparsely populated Puri Jata and Lovina on the north coast with their black sandy beaches, and Tianyar and Kubu along the western side of the island.) Those who keep a close watch on the ocean may even spot a dolphin or two frolicking around passing boats, which are less frequent than in the south.

Venturing into central Bali via curvy countryside roads affords magnificent views of gently sloping rice paddies and sun-drenched greenery. The village of Munduk, once a mountain retreat for Dutch colonial settlers in the early 1900s, is a pleasant place to enjoy cooler temperatures and the locally grown Arabica coffee at one of the plantations. In the plateau area nearby, the township of Bedugul is most famous for



Religious icons are everywhere



Beratan Lake and Ulun Danu Beratan Temple. The temple itself, although firmly entrenched on the tourist map (or should we say trap?) is not much to look at, but the setting on the lake with the spellbinding mountains in the background is priceless. Recreational activities such as parasailing, canoeing and water skiing are premium pastimes.

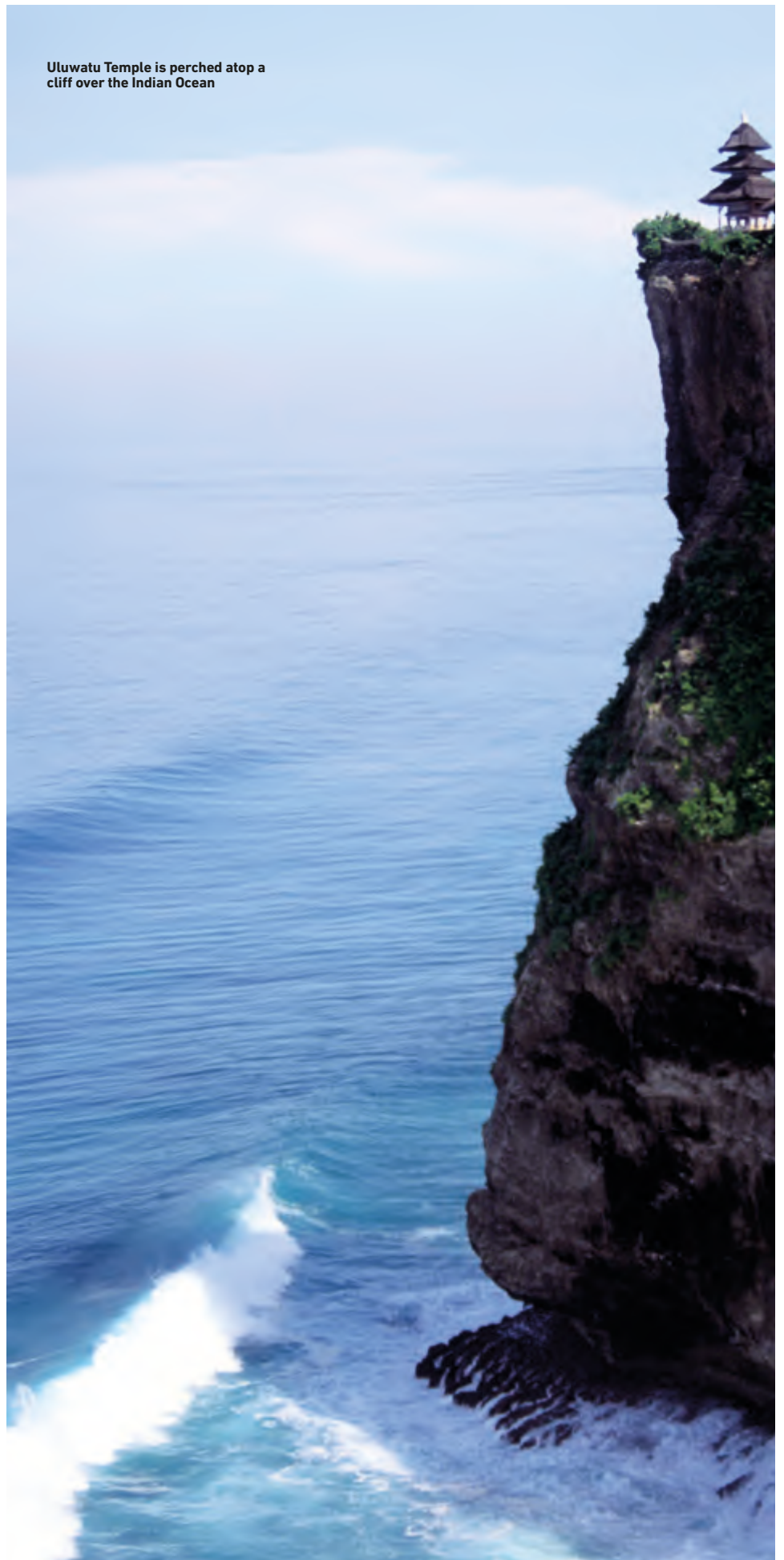
Australian native Stuart Smith, another long-term resident of Bali, also recommends getting lost on the island, albeit for more mundane reasons. On a recent trip he visited his wife's uncle who lives in a remote part of the island. They drove from Jimbaran in south Bali, where he owns a villa, in the direction of Amed, a village on the easternmost point of Bali. Trying to find the relative's house they got hopelessly lost on the winding dirt roads, but were rewarded with some of the most beautiful scenery and quaint villages he's ever come across. "Many of the roads don't have names," he says with a laugh. "But it was one of the best drives I ever took. I wish I could find my way back!"

This western part of Bali is home to Mount Agung, which at 3,142-metres high is Bali's zenith as well as its most active volcano (though it hasn't blown its top since 1963). An essential



Woman pampered with traditional Balinese massage and banana leaf wrap

Uluwatu Temple is perched atop a cliff over the Indian Ocean





Aerial view of terraced rice fields with Mount Agung in the Distance

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activity on the island is the "sunrise climb": a trek that brings you to the strato-volcano's summit from where you have panoramic views of neighbouring Lombok including - on sunny days - the peak of Mount Rinjani.

### Southern Comforts

South Bali is where all the action takes place. The Kuta/Legian area is comparable to Patong Beach on Phuket or Chaweng on Koh Samui. Whether you're looking for a busy beach scene, souvenir shopping or intoxicating, neon-splashed nightlife - it's all here in spades and buckets.

At the other end of the tourist spectrum is Bukit Peninsula where all the swanky five-star hotels reside. Surfers are the lords of the waves here. Also cool is the famous cliff-hanging temple at Uluwatu with its feisty and naughty monkeys.

Slightly north of Legian is the more upscale Seminyak, popular with affluent expats for its array of trendy eateries, nightspots and fashion outlets which have popped up in recent years. Happily existing alongside traditional *warungs* (hole-in-the wall restaurants serving

authentic Indonesian cuisine), are state-of-the-culinary-arts venues like Sarong, Metis and Sardine and the renowned Ku De Ta. A paragon of old Indonesia with a modern twist is Biku Bali, a teahouse, restaurant, antique shop and bookstore where you'll find "rice table" (a smorgasbord of Indonesian delights) as well as high tea on the menu.

Balinese culture is deeply rooted in the Hindu faith and, despite the onslaught of the tourist hordes, traditional rites and quirky customs are still very much alive. There's an undeniably magical quality in the air wherever you go. Is it the delicate sounds of the *rindik gamelan* (traditional bamboo instrument) emanating from the temples, the verdant mountains enveloped in fog or the mysterious smiles of the locals? I haven't quite figured it out yet but one thing is for sure - the Island of the Gods is aptly nicknamed - and I'll be back to investigate more of its enigmas. ☞

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