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They're the kind of places we went to as cash-strapped student backpackers, so what's it like to revisit Bali, Thailand and Burma in style? Three writers find out >>



*The Far East, from
basic to luxe: huts
on the sands of
Chaweng Beach
in Thailand.
Opposite: The
infinity pool
at Alila Villas
Uluwatu, on the
island of Bali*

Luxe hotel hopping in BALI

by Rachel Sullivan

I first set foot on Bali on a round-the-world trip as a student, lugging a backpack and in search of bronzed surfers and beach massages. I stayed in a cheap hostel in Kuta, where buzzing flies and the all-night boom of the club next door were companions as constant as my *Rough Guide*. But still, Bali got under my skin – with its incense-scented temples, vivid green rice paddies, roadside shrines and jaw-dropping sunsets, it struck me as the most romantic place on earth. One day, I vowed, I would come back and do Bali in style.

And that's just what I did when I returned last year, on what I hoped would be the most romantic holiday of my life: my honeymoon. Bali, at the far end of the Indian Ocean, seemed ideal – exotic but safe, big enough to be interesting, with a cuisine in which it's acceptable to eat chilli with everything, even at breakfast.

So, how different is Bali from the place I rocked up to in 1996? Ten years on from the terrorist bombings that killed 202 people, tourist numbers have finally recovered and a slew of super-luxe hotels has opened. It was at one of these that we started our trip: Alila Villas Uluwatu, perched on a limestone cliff above a private beach at Bali's southernmost tip. It strikes the perfect balance between the privacy of a villa and the convenience of a hotel. The communal area has two sensational restaurants, a spectacular infinity pool and cabanas that protrude off the edge of the cliff, blustered by breezes from the Indian Ocean below.

It's tempting to lie around all day in your private salt-water pool, being brought ice-cold beers and red-hot *nasi goreng* by your personal butler (you can request your

butlering at any level from the vaguely standoffish to the downright fawning). But it's worth resisting that urge and renting a motorbike to tour the Bukit Peninsula, as this part of the island is called. Stop off at Finn's Beach Club and take the old monorail train down to the cute thatched beach bar, where you can drink a milkshake as you dip your toes into the Indian Ocean. Later, make the trip to Uluwatu temple to watch the nightly 'monkey dance' – the sight of dozens of bare-chested men dancing is spellbinding. On returning to your villa you'll find it lit with candles and incense, sliding doors open to let the sea breeze waft in the scent of tuberose and lemongrass.

Our next stop was Ubud, in the island's jungle-clad heart. It takes a while to get there along pot-holed roads, but there's

plenty to see: rural houses resembling Balinese temples; conical-hatted men working rice fields; monkeys hanging from trees. On the drive to Ubud we noticed a curious thing – in every

town, the shops all sell the same thing as each other, but different from the next town along. So you will go through a village where every shop sells stone buddhas, or wood carvings, or chickens. It's worth stopping at the gold village and silver village, where you'll find both delicate and bold ethnic jewellery.

Once you reach Ubud, it's obvious what the speciality is in this jungle town: art. The streets are thronged with artists' studios and shops selling everything from the surrealist to the batik, but there are also coffee shops, fish-pedicure spas, cocktail bars and a cracking food market

"The sea breeze wafts in the scent of tuberose and lemongrass"



Clockwise from below: A garden statue in Ubud; a blissful Balinese sunset; a private villa at Como Shambhala Estate; Rachel and her husband Grub in Ubud; colorful shade from the bright sun; Uluwatu Temple

where stalls churn out authentic Balinese cooking, such as *gado-gado* (steamed vegetables with peanut sauce).

Ubud has accommodation of all levels, from backpacker hangouts to eco-luxe hotels. And it was to one of the latter that we headed next. Fifteen minutes outside town is the Como Shambhala Estate, a spa that has topped travel polls for years and won this year's *Condé Nast Traveller* award for the best destination spa in the world. That's some billing to live up to, and yet somehow the Como Shambhala Estate manages it.

Set deep within a rainforest, this is surely one of the world's

most beautiful hotels. Staggered up the steep slopes of the sacred Ayung River Gorge, its air of calm is punctuated only by the crashing river below and the occasional shriek of a tropical bird. We were even more impressed when we saw our villa, with its private pool, huge black stone bath and enormous four-poster.

Two restaurants, Glow and Kudus House, serve deliciously healthy food with raw options at every meal. Boozers may be alarmed to see that there is no alcohol on the menu but, after a quiet word, a waiter will rustle you up a cocktail or glass of wine. However, the atmosphere is so serene that it's unlikely you'll feel the urge to drink – this is not the place to come if you want a party.

If all that healthy living leaves you keen to do something energetic, try The Kintamani Freewheel, where you take a mountain bike to the crater of dramatic volcano Mount Batur at dawn and skid nerve-janglingly downhill; or go white-water rafting in the River Ayung below.

Having thoroughly detoxed, it was time to retox. Our next stop was another Alila hotel, Alila Villas Soori, which is perched on the edge of a black sand beach. Our villa had a private pool that lapped right up to our bedroom's sliding doors – you can slip out of bed and straight into the pool. The upper villas have more privacy and – essential if you're a sun worshipper – are less shaded.

While you're there, make sure you visit Setinyak, a 40-minute car ride away. Just down the beach from Kuta, it couldn't be more different, packed with cool bars and restaurants. We loved the Potato Head Beach Club, which had the biggest cocktail menu we'd ever seen and is the perfect place to watch Bali's kite-fliers on the beach as the sunset reddens into night.

Go: Ampersand Travel (ampersandtravel.com) offers a 14-day trip to Bali with four nights at Alila Villas Soori, four nights at Como Shambhala Estate and four nights at Alila Villas Uluwatu, flights and transfers from \$3,270 per person. ▶

