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LUXX TRAVEL



Far from the madding crowd

A romantic boat for two and a new forest sanctuary
from which to escape Bali's hordes. By *Susan D'Arcy*



WHITE MAGIC

The Alexa, which has one cabin and seven members of crew, by Komodo island

I AM IN A gazebo suspended over a pristine rainforest valley. Jasmine perfumes the air and butterflies flap their lemon-coloured wings languidly in the tropical heat, coming so close that I could reach out and touch them. An ancient waterway provides the rhythm for my unplugged soundtrack, birdsong adds the melody, while somewhere way down, and well hidden, the mighty Pakerisan river plays bass. It is blissful, so please don't listen to the doom-mongers – Bali isn't ruined.

Indonesia has somewhere between 17,000 and 18,300 islands, depending on at what point the cartographer ran out of energy and/or ink. Bali has traditionally been our favourite, the blueprint for exoticism, with pea-green paddy terraces, volcanic black beaches and exquisite temples at every turn. However, vast tracts of its coast have been scarred by overdevelopment, and commercialisation has started to creep inland to its lush hills. Tour buses ferrying about Elizabeth Gilbert groupies now cause so many traffic jams in the cultural capital of Ubud that expats joke that the bestselling author's fans should Eat, Pay and Leave.

That said, you can still find the peace, privacy and cutting-edge design that encapsulates the island's appeal. You just have to look a little further afield. A 40-minute drive northeast of Ubud, in Pejeng Kangin, I find sanctuary at Hoshinoya Bali, a hideaway by one of Japan's most sophisticated hoteliers that opened in January. It scores a perfect ten for style, substance and sense of place, having been constructed as a traditional "village" around the subak, the island's sacred network of canals.

This irrigation system dates back to the ninth century and channels water through temples and

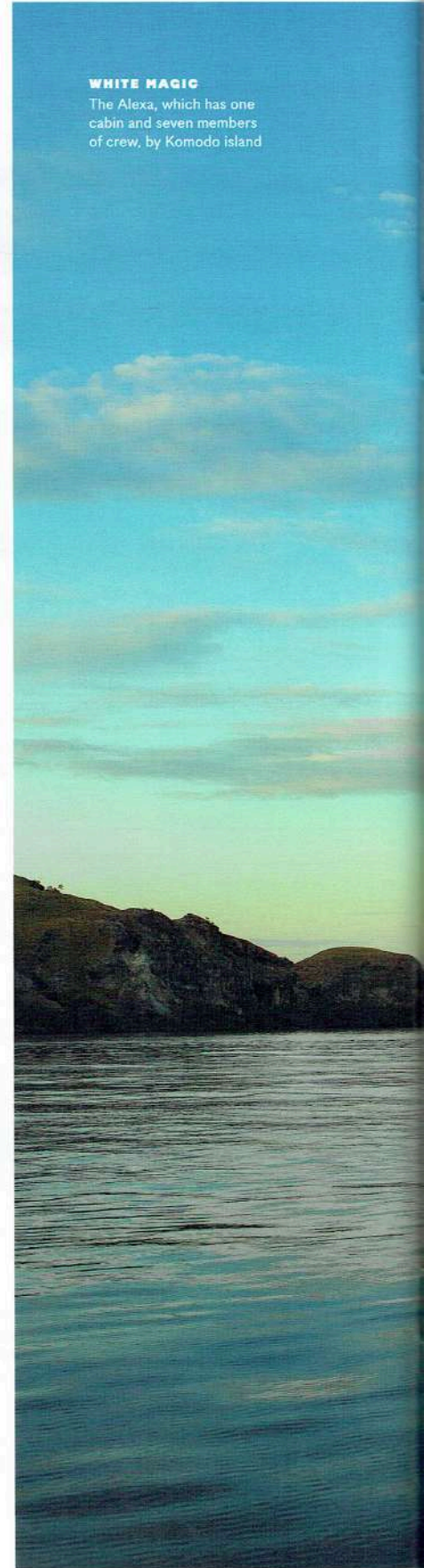
out to the fields in an expression of *tri hita karana*, the Balinese belief in harmony between the spirit, the human and the natural worlds. It still works so efficiently that today's farmers have no need of fertilisers or pesticides.

Hoshinoya's designers have taken that holy water as the resort's recurrent motif. The 30 villas are bordered by the subak and built around three communal pools. Seductive interiors have intricate wood carvings by Ubud artisans and striking Indonesian works of art, and the poolside lounges are discreetly screened from neighbouring *salas* by floating gardens. Don't bother to bring a book – the vibe is so soporific that you won't be able to focus on a single sentence.

The *tri hita karana* philosophy is spectacularly reinforced by the seven gazebos cantilevered over the rainforest canopy, where I revel in the connection to such a pure slice of nature. There is no gym within the indulgent spa. Instead I am encouraged to walk in the countryside and wave to bamboo-hatted farmhands, ankle-deep in the very water that flows through the resort.

My immersion continues at the daily workshop on *canang sari*, or Hindu offerings. Tut, one of the team, shows me how to use bamboo sticks to stitch my coconut-leaf basket together, then smiles sympathetically at my Edward Scissorhands attempts and takes me to lay them at the hotel's temple. That night I dine on a delicious fusion of international, Japanese and Balinese dishes, such as a consommé of kaffir lime with foie gras and aubergine *dengaku*.

It's hard to leave this intoxicating cocoon, but if I want to see the beach as well, and escape the →





BALI HIGH
Hoshinoya Bali is built on a series of ancient channels

busy resorts, then I need to take a 50-minute flight to Flores for a cruise around the uninhabited pinpricks of jungle that dot the Unesco-protected Komodo National Park.

My yacht, *Alexa*, is easy to spot in Labuan Bajo's busy harbour – 30 metres of flirty curves, every inch painted in the coolest of snowflake whites. She is an ethereal debutante amid a last dance at the disco of dishevelled fishing tugs and liveboards. Thankfully her owner, the interior designer Veronika Blomgren, ignored expert advice that it was madness to try to transform a cargo boat into the aquatic answer to a Shakespearean sonnet. She reasoned that lovers don't want to share paradise with anyone other than their sweetheart, so instead of the standard sleeps-12 refit for a vessel of this size, she bravely made *Alexa* a love nest for two (as well as a seven-man crew, fortunately so discreet that they make Jeeves look like a school-gate gossip).

Alexa offers much more than unprecedented levels of privacy. She also avoids the conspicuous consumption that kills the mood on board most yachts. There are no gold taps, thrice-shined wooden veneers or Jacuzzis. The wall-to-wall white is interrupted only by a pop of verdigris or violet for furnishings and a fairy dusting of tactile primitive sculptures and silk rugs. The main deck has a spacious bedroom with wraparound windows and a

cosy sitting room that doubles as a spa for anytime massages, but the draw is the vast upper deck, with its sink-in sofa, dining area and decadent daybed. It deserves a passion of Burton and Taylor proportions.

IN THE AGE of overload, I spend hours without even thinking of checking my emails. I am too entranced by the archipelago's festoons of land-that-time-forgot islands, each one carpeted by mint-green grasses, some topped with smoky peaks, all skirted by mysterious mangroves, clotted-cream beaches and waters that alternate between teal and turquoise until finally they fall off the edge of the horizon. I feel zero inclination to move, but the enthusiasm of the cruise director, Nico, eventually persuades me to take advantage of the unlimited diving and snorkelling included in the rate. Within minutes we are sinking through sparkling plankton to go eye to eye with graceful manta rays.

Nico tells me about Batu Bolong, where strong currents marshal schools of fish to a sliver of colourful reef, creating the Piccadilly Circus of the marine world. It is one of Asia's best dive sites and, consequently, can get horribly crowded. Let's set that in context – perhaps a handful of boats visit every day. Still, the joy of not having to answer to other passengers means that I can write my own itinerary. I elect to get up early to enjoy Batu Bolong's rainbows

of fish alone, and I am tucking into homemade post-dive pastries by the time the hordes descend.

That feeling of smugness is inescapable during my encounter with the famous komodo dragons. I don't have to join the unedifying crocodile line of tourists queuing up for a selfie with the very tame specimens that congregate around the ranger station's kitchen on Rinca island. Instead, my captain scours Komodo's wild southern coast, and when he spots these awesome three-metre lizards, one of the world's last living links to prehistoric predators, someone taps on my cabin door. I pull on a kaftan and hit the upper deck in time to see one maul a deer. Memorable, if not exactly romantic. For that there are dawn kayaking jaunts on mirror-calm bays, beach picnics and campfires, sunset hikes up paths marked out by resident goats and sleep-outs on deck under a star-spangled sky.

All too soon we're back in Labuan Bajo, but I console myself that a trip on *Alexa*, like the best love affairs, will never really end. ● *Ampersand Travel* (020 7819 9770; ampersandtravel.com) can arrange seven nights at Hoshinoya from £7,260pp, B&B, including flights and transfers. Seven nights on the *Alexa* costs from £14,995pp, with full-board accommodation, unlimited diving, water sports, massages, transfers and flights with Garuda Indonesia