

# Catching Waves in Canggu

It may not enjoy the popularity of Bali but Canggu has the perfect waves for the novice surfer. **TARINI PAL** signed up for a lesson in its waters and found her bohemian self on its sands.

*A surfer rides a wave at a beach in Canggu, Indonesia.*

PAUL KENNEDY/JALARY (2)



◀ *Echo Beach in Canggu is slowly rising in popularity among tourists.*

“ARE YOU READY, KIRANA?,” boomed Abtu, my 23-year-old Balinese surf instructor, as he held my longboard, ready to help me catch the wave that was looming behind us. I nodded impatiently, positioned myself on the board, and before I knew it, was belting towards the shore. I foolishly believed that I would finally be able to stand up on my board this time if I went through all the movements that Abtu had taught me. Once again, however, I shot off the board and into the warm waters of the Indian Ocean for the 10<sup>th</sup> time in a row. When my head bobbed out of the water, I turned back to see Abtu chuckling to himself. “What’s going on, Kirana?” he shouted in his endearing Jamaican accent that sang all the vowels. I scrambled back up on my board, just as a seven-year-old local smugly whizzed past me on his shortboard, and began the arduous journey back to Abtu, laughing and shouting back, “TA-RI-NI! NOT KIRANA!” I was momentarily tempted to tell Abtu that *kirana* is the Hindi word for a corner shop, but then let it go. Why spoil the fun of hearing another version of my name said so charmingly in his lilting foreign tongue?

Bali is the most famous tourist destination in Indonesia, with Kuta and Seminyak being the best-known beach hotspots. However, I had decided to travel to the offbeat Canggu. Like its popular cousins, Canggu is known for its surf shacks, yoga studios, and hipster cafes and bars, but is less frequented by tourists. A quick search on Airbnb revealed some beautiful villas in the area, perfect for couples, families, and groups of friends. But I was flying solo, so I decided to book a room at The Bali Dream Villa & Resort ([thebaldreamvillaresort.com](http://thebaldreamvillaresort.com)), where one can get quite a lot of bang for one’s buck.

Since I was going to spend just three days in Canggu, I wasted no time in hitting the beach. Berawa, Batu Bolong, and Echo are the three main beaches, and they are essentially different sections of the same stretch of sand. Of these three, Batu Bolong is the place to go for novice surfers, as the waves here are long and relatively slow. The only disadvantage, of course, is that it can tend to be a bit crowded. A few ‘surf schools’ located close to the centre of Canggu offer lessons at high prices from certified surf instructors. Batu Bolong, however, is teeming with more informal surf shacks, and I was quite happy with my instructor at The Sand, a small but neat looking shack, where I was charged ₹1,700 for a two-hour lesson with Abtu, rash guard and board rental included.

After following instructions to generously slather surf zinc across my nose and cheeks, I followed Abtu to the shore, feeling like a tiny tribal warrior, suitably smeared with warpaint and ready for action. He chose a spot right in front of the slightly forbidding Hindu temple on the beach and made me practise my posture on the board a few times before we set off into the blue. I could have taken this opportunity to pray for success in the sea, but hardly qualifying as a believer, I had no idea which one of the 330 million Hindu deities the temple was dedicated to.

One thing that took me by surprise was how tiring it is to paddle one’s way into the water over and over again. It took me about 30 minutes on the first day before I could even stand up on my board,



and even though I managed to get the hang of it eventually, I was pretty much spent after an hour and a half in the water. Feeling quite proud of myself after our first lesson, I decided to end my day with a drink at the chic beach lounge beside The Sand, correspondingly named The Lawn, which also happens to be one of Canggu's most popular hangouts, complete with day beds and a swanky infinity pool overlooking the sea.

I couldn't wait to get back into the water the next day, even though my frail arms were terribly sore from the previous day's workout. Based on the surf forecast, Abtu told me that the best time for us to go out on the water would be either in the morning or in the late afternoon. I opted for the latter and ate a leisurely lunch at Dian Café (*dian-cafe-restaurant.business.site*), a modest open-air *warung* (family-owned restaurant/cafe) on Echo Beach. The nasi goreng didn't disappoint, nor did the advanced surfers who rode spectacular waves in the distance. The swell was slightly strong that



▲ A surfboard doubles as an advertising post.

▲ COMO Uma Canggu is a luxe hotel complex on the ocean, providing surf gear and classes. Below: The Bali Dream Villa & Resort combines modern and traditional Balinese architecture.



afternoon, so it took Abtu and me a little longer to find the ideal spot. Once we did, however, I felt a lot more confident than I had the previous day, even managing to ride my board all the way to the shore a couple of times. I was making progress.

Keen to check out Canggu's lesser-known bars that evening, I visited Pretty Poison (*prettypoisonbar.com*), a grungy skate bar where one can sit back and watch tattooed skaters rip the outdoor skating bowl to the accompaniment of heavy metal music blaring in the background.

Canggu is also dotted with a number of boutique stores that sell reasonably priced beach wear. Blood + Bone (*bloodnbone.com*), a company that works with local suppliers and manufacturers, has a few stores around Bali and a couple of them in Canggu as well. I picked up a cute sundress at one of their outlets the next day, before parking myself for lunch at The Shady Shack (*the-shady-shack.business.site*), which has become somewhat of an institution since it opened in 2016. Overlooking verdant rice paddies, the cafe serves vegetarian and vegan fare, and offers seating both in its charming wooden interiors with large open windows as well as its garden—under dense tropical foliage. I ordered the 'naked falafel', accompanied by fresh citrus tabbouleh and harissa tahini, making for a wholesome, light, and delicious meal.

The weather took a turn for the worse after lunch, with dark nimbus clouds blanketing the afternoon sky. Abtu looked concerned as we walked on to the beach, surveying the threatening heavens like a hawk. It began to drizzle when we were out in the water, but I was happy to continue perfecting my technique. I fancied myself



▲ From left: The Slow is a hotel that features locally crafted wood and bamboo furniture; enjoy live music at the Old Man's beer garden.



an expert after just two days of basic lessons, of course. About 30 minutes into our lesson, a flash of lightning pierced the grey sky in the distance. Most of the other surfing instructors began taking their protégés back to shore. A look of worry crossed Abtu's usually cheerful visage. "Kirana," he said. "We gonna do one last wave, okay?" I nodded obediently, not wanting to cause any more distress. "I just don't wanna take the risk," he explained.

A couple of more lightning bolts flashed through the sky as we were pulling out of the water, accompanied by portentous growls of thunder. Abtu apologised for having had to cut short our lesson and insisted on treating me to beer, to make amends. I accepted his offer when I found out that he had a daily quota of five free beers at The Sand. Most surfers had come out of the water by now, save for a few rogue ones. Abtu observed them while sipping on his beer, muttering disapprovingly. He then revealed that back in November 2017, in a freak accident, a 34-year-old Belgian tourist was struck dead by lightning during a surf lesson. I suddenly felt a wave of gratitude for my instructor's keen sense of judgement.

Fortunately, nobody was struck by lightning that particular evening, and the mood was lightened by a long chat with Abtu, where we discussed life, love, and longboards. Abtu confessed that although surfing was his first love, he didn't see a financially sustainable future for himself as a freelance instructor and hoped to run his own bed-and-breakfast some day. On learning that I used to work in Bollywood, he coyly admitted that he was a huge fan of Hindi cinema and promptly broke into an animated rendition of *Tujhe Dekha Toh*, leaving me in splits.

I ended my last day in Canggu with a drink at the Old Man's (*oldmans.net*), a gargantuan beer garden overlooking the beach, named after the surf break at Batu Bolong. Friday nights feature live rock 'n' roll gigs, and I was thoroughly entertained by some oldies who were breaking up the dance floor to classic tunes. One thing that struck me, not just about Old Man's but about Canggu in general, was that there were plenty of other solo travellers around. Although Canggu has slowly begun to gain popularity over the years, the town manages to retain its laid-back vibe and remains the perfect place to spend some quality time with yourself and discover your inner bohemian. My night ended on a bittersweet note, with a message from Abtu, "You are my best friend. Best client ever. Thank for you to choose me as your teacher. I remember always." I boarded my flight with a heavy heart the next day, making a promise to myself that it wouldn't be long before my return to this slice of paradise and a reunion with my Balinese bezzie. ✦

#### GETTING THERE

Fly into the gateway city of Denpasar from New Delhi, Mumbai, or Bengaluru. The most direct route is via Singapore on **Singapore Airlines** (*singaporeair.com*). From Denpasar, take a cab to Canggu (13 km).

#### STAY

**The Slow** (*theslow.com*), a boho chic hotel, comprises 12 retro-modernist suites, some with their own plunge pools. If you like to stay on the beachfront, go for **COMO Uma Canggu** (from ₹15,925; *comohotels.com*), where you can choose from 52 rooms and suites.

#### SURFING SCHOOLS

If you want to enrol in a surf school with licensed instructors, you have a couple of options to choose from:

##### Bali Local Surf School

at The Chillhouse offers lessons with a 1:2 ratio (one coach for two guests). From ₹3,000 per lesson; *thechillhouse.com*

##### Wave House Surf School

offers a post-lesson photo/video analysis as a bonus. Price available on request; *wavehousebali.com*

FROM TOP: MASSIMILIANO FINZI/GETTYIMAGES; COURTESY OF COMO UMA CANGGU; COURTESY OF THE BALI DREAM VILLA & RESORT

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF THE SLOW; KHELLON/GETTYIMAGES