

Eden of the East

Think you know Bali? Think again

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PEOPLE tend to have preconceived notions of Bali.

Mine was that of an island paradise complete with ink-blue waters, sun-drenched beaches and hammocks hanging between swaying palm trees.

While I was not entirely wrong (there were no hammocks in sight), I realised, by the end of my visit, that what makes Bali the island of the gods is not entirely its landscapes, breathtaking as those are.

Rather, it is the easy communion between the Balinese people, their natural surroundings and their traditions that seem to make the Indonesian island a magnet for all and sundry.

Take, for instance, on the second day of my stay at Jimbaran Bay. I was told that my group was going on an adventure ride across the island.

"Then, you will see the real Bali," promised my guide, Eddie, a mild-mannered young man with a dry sense of humour typical of the Balinese people.

As we traversed noisily through the pothole-ridden roads to make our way to our first stop at Tegal Judi, a village, it felt as if we were intruding on the daily lives of the Balinese people as men and women quietly tilled acres of verdant rice fields.

Further down, wrinkled Balinese women shared jokes while carrying

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— John O'Sullivan, general manager, Four Seasons Resorts, Bali

out their daily washing in little rivulets that flowed downstream.

Meanwhile, a boisterous group of children, all smartly dressed in bright orange school uniforms, merrily waved us by.

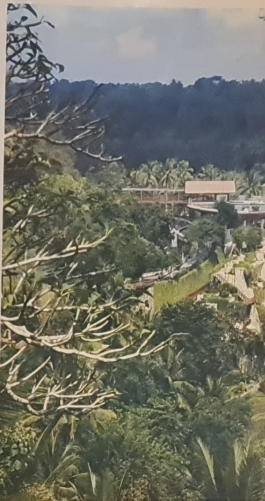
"I think I know what it must be like to be a rock star," exclaimed one of my travelling companions, as we waved past yet another group of children.

An hour later, we arrived at Tegal Judi. There, as Eddie pointed out the ancient stone quarry that provided the villagers with their livelihood, a solitary man, humming to himself while hacking away at the rocks, stopped politely to answer our many, often ridiculous questions.

The stones, the man said, were made of black volcanic rocks, and the people of Tegal Judi used traditional methods and techniques that were handed down to them over generations to cut the stones.

The thick black stones were later used to build the thousands of temples and tens of thousands of shrines strewn across the island, he told us.

"It must be so different for you," Eddie observed wryly. "You work in



Left: The view in Bali, be it on the beach or tucked away in a canopy of verdant rainforest is always a sight to behold. Right: A Balinese man participates in a traditional burial ceremony.

an office, and he works among nature."

Later, we were treated to lunch at a bamboo restaurant located, of all places, in the middle of a rainforest.

Winding through Mount Batukaru, our Land Rover made its way to the restaurant, and while we tucked into a variety of dishes including satay, Balinese fried rice and jackfruit curry, we were treated to a "concert" of singing birds and barking dogs.

In the middle of this cacophony, a melancholy Balinese tune — played by one of the villagers who lived near the edge of the rainforest — did its best to be heard, too. A unique dining experience, to say the very least.

Leaving behind the jungles of Bali, we went to Ubud a few days later — this time to observe another important facet of the island: its traditions.

Amelia, our guide, explained that a Balinese princess in Ubud died four years previous and her family was conducting a royal burial ceremony because it was an auspicious day.

Tens of thousands of people descended on the streets to pay their last respects, while men carrying torches burnt paper effigies that had to be burnt after the prayers, made their way across different streets, in order



to "confuse the spirits," said Amelia.

The men converged at a road junction, and to the steady beat of gongs, they carried the effigies to an open ground to be burnt.

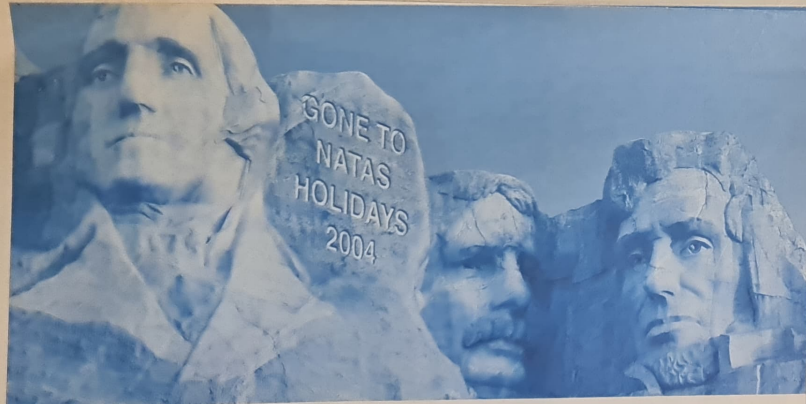
Time and again, I observed how traditions such as these were woven tightly into the everyday lives of the Balinese people and how they seemed to embrace those traditions wholeheartedly.

The Bali mystique was perhaps best summed up by John O'Sullivan,

general manager at the island's Four Seasons Resorts.

"Over dinner one night, he told me: 'There's a certain sense of latent spirituality in Bali — present in its food, the people and the island itself. I think that's what makes people come back to Bali time and again.'

The trip was made possible by Four Seasons Resorts, Bali, and Australian Airlines, who's *First Horizon* weekly from Singapore to Bali.



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