

BALI

by Gillian Handley



Lush terraced rice paddies

Photos Anton Handley

Bali – Island Magic.



Temples etch strange silhouettes against the skies

Bali is one of the smallest but brightest stars in the constellation that is Indonesia. Lying, half-forgotten by time on the Pacific Ring of Fire, Bali lies to the north of Australia, between Java and the island of Lombok.

Bali is an island of lush, terraced rice paddies, dense jungles, soaring volcanoes wreathed in clouds and of splintering surf crashing on deserted beaches. Tangled forests hide ancient places of worship and everywhere, temples etch strange silhouettes against the skies. Bali is a land of pageantry and mysticism, of music and intricate dances, of shadow puppets in flickering firelight, of demons at crossroads and of joyous funerals of flame, where the spirit of the deceased is liberated by his loved ones.

The Balinese are a wonderful people. Their sunny, engaging smiles and unbelievably warm and friendly natures belie the turbulent history of their country. Time and time again, outsiders, whether from other parts of Indonesia or from foreign countries have attempted to impose their beliefs and way of life on the Balinese, with tragic consequences. The Balinese have resisted courageously, often committing mass suicide in unwavering defence of their beliefs.

Bali is to a certain extent, isolated from the rest of Indonesia by its religious and cultural differences that developed as a result of a part of their history. Gajah Mada, chief minister of the Majapahit kingdom ruled Bali from 1343. At the time Moslem power was on the rise in Java and the Majapahits were forced to flee to Bali in 1478 followed by the scholars, artists and intelligentsia. This was the beginning of Bali's astonishing cultural activity.

Central to the make-up of the Balinese is his religion – fundamental to every detail of his life. He is Agama Hindu and his world is peopled with a pantheon of gods who must be worshipped and propitiated every single day of his life in almost every action that he takes. There are benevolent and mischievous spirits, there are



Rice paddies and exotic flowers

spirits of the house, the village, the town and the state. There are a myriad of festivals to be observed with the help of the priests and elders who are versed in their religion.

Above all, there exists a single unity, the source of creation. This is Sanghyang Widhi – God omnipotent. In him, all ancestral spirits and deities achieve a higher unity. Agama Hindu is a monotheistic religion but the supreme god is not often worshipped directly. Temples and shrines are dedicated to God in his many manifestations. For the most part, the Balinese worship the same trinity of gods as those of the Indian religion. In his role as creator, God is Brahma, in his role as preserver he is Vishnu and in his power to destroy, he is Siwa.

The pervasive effect of the Balinese religion has given Bali its magical qualities. The Balinese have a wonderful appreciation of beauty and this is evident in the smallest everyday actions. There is no word for 'art' in the Balinese language. Everyone beautifies

everything – artistry is not considered a specific calling or talent. In the mornings, the gods are greeted and offerings are given. Deities of higher rank and generally benevolent aspect receive offerings on the altar of the house temple. Small gifts of flowers and rice are placed in decorative containers made of woven palm fronds and laid in front of the entrance to the home. These are to appease the mischievous spirits. Ultimately, the many wild dogs of Bali eat these offerings, but great care is taken in their preparation in spite of this.

On a festival day, of which there are many in Bali, the whole village, or if it is a national event, the whole of the island, is beautified in honour of the relevant god. The stems of tall palm trees are placed at the entrance to the home with a small altar table at shoulder height. The men of the house participate in the decorating of the palm tree with plaits of palm fronds, exotic flowers and colourful interweavings of green and yellow palm strips.

Processions of villagers can be seen, dressed in their very best, making their way to the relevant temples. The women glide along gracefully with silver dishes piled high with intricately decorated offerings balanced on their heads. The tinkling, hollow resonances of the gamelan orchestras can be heard as the men pass by. The music of Bali has a natural, woody, musical sound as if distilled from the land itself.

Wherever you go on Bali, the intertwining of the spiritual, the magical and the mystical with everyday life is immediately apparent. It is a quality which gives poetic intensity to the most mundane actions of the Balinese.

Parts of Bali have become commercialised. During the 80's the island was a mecca for young Australians. Luckily the influence of the visitors has been kept largely to the Kuta and Sanur Beach areas. Here, the discordant traces of western influence are all too evident. Heading north however, one can quickly rediscover the serenity and enchantment of an unspoilt Bali. The

island is small enough to explore in its entirety. Small vans can be hired at reasonable cost and petrol is laughably cheap. Many tourists do not venture away from the main centres and while these are usually well worth visiting, tiny villages can be found where the sight of a foreigner will attract the attention of all the villagers.

In the north of Bali, there are no tall buildings on the beach fronts. Rice paddies often reach to the water's edge and duck farmers chivy their flocks along the beach at sunset, the large straw hats of the farmer and the squat waddling figures of the ducks, silhouetted against a flaming sky. Aromas float from outdoor restaurants on a tide of conversation. In a hall a gamelan orchestra practices with much laughter interspersed with liquid notes. Frangipani blossoms star the night sky and their warm, tropical scent pervades the island. In the monkey forest nearby, the chatterings of the sacred monkeys, protected unto eternity, grow quieter.



Beautiful temples and shrines



Weaving and Batik handicrafts

GENERAL Getting There

By Air

Garuda, the national carrier of Indonesia, flies from Hong Kong, Australia, Singapore, Amsterdam, Tokyo and Los Angeles. Bali is part of the Indonesian archipelago and as such SA citizens are currently denied entry. The situation is expected to change soon.

Currency

The basic unit is the Indonesian Rupiah, (Rp).

Health

No inoculations are necessary but immunization against cholera, typhoid and tetanus are recommended.

Language

Bahasa Indonesian. Colloquial Balinese and some English are also spoken.

When to go

The Balinese climate is moderately tropical with average year round temperatures in the mid to upper 20's. The dry season lasts from April to September. Wet season, from October

to March, is characterised by short, heavy rains. The best weather is generally found from May to August. Temperatures are cooler in the mountains.

Accommodation

A wide variety of accommodation is available, from deluxe multi-national hotels to simple guest houses. Losmen are for those travelling on a tight budget. They are family run operations often based on renting cottages in the family compound. Most large hotels are found along the coast in resort areas or in Denpasar, the capital. Smaller hotels offer Balinese style accommodation in private thatched cottages with veranda and garden. These places very often provide first class services and amenities.

Cuisine

Rice is the staple food of Bali. Traditional Balinese dishes use pork, chicken, beef, peanuts, fish, noodles, vegetables and coconut. Many exotic fruit like the foul smelling durian, the starfruit blimbing and the juicy mangosteen are to be found. □