

INDONESIA: THE LURE OF LOMBOK

Affordable tropical island has Bali's white beaches and amenities without the throngs of tourists

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A beach on Gili Air

We pinch ourselves. Can this be for real? We're sipping fresh mint-and-ginger mojitos by a stunning seaside infinity pool, waiters flitting between deck chairs – and our chic Qunci Villas resort costs less than \$200 a night. Oh, and that includes breakfast and taxes too.

Is tropical Lombok a new Indonesian island paradise, where luxury is affordable?

The island is sometimes described as “like Bali 30 years ago.” A new airport opened in 2011 to lure international travellers with direct flights (we took a high-speed passenger ferry from Bali). But development is slow on Lombok. So unlike tourist-thronged Bali, Lombok has long curves of white-fringed bays with few hotels and fewer people shaking out their towels on the sand.

And the handful of oceanfront boutique hotels that have sprung up offer terrific value for a beach vacation.

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Hotel Tugu Lombok restaurant

Mind you, with more traditional rural villages and a predominantly Islamic culture, Lombok is also more subdued than Bali with its colourful Hindu-based celebrations. And it isn't manicured. It feels a bit awkward peering over the pool edge at the clusters of hopeful vendors hawking sarongs and souvenirs to feed their families.

But tourism benefits everyone – servers and hotel staff are super friendly and helpful, happy to

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have these jobs they tell us. (And like other visitors, we buy some sarongs, useful for the beach.)



The balcony and room at Qunci Villas is stylish and has a great waterfront view – photo Qunci Villas

Apart from its beaches and reasonable costs, Lombok also entices with what’s underwater and inland.

A smooth 30-minute ride in a wooden outrigger takes us to “Gili T.” It’s the largest of the three tiny Gili Islands, known for superb scuba diving and snorkeling. The islands have no cars or motorized vehicles. Bouncy one-horse carts carry overnight visitors with their suitcases or backpacks along the lone sandy path ringing each island to their bungalow or hostel.

And Gili T is humming! Dive shops abound, with travellers studying dive books and learning to dive in outdoor pools. We hear Aussie drawls, German, Italian and other languages. At a fish pedicure spa, fish nibble on a couple’s feet in a fish tank.

There are also oodles of low-key beach bars, coffee shops and restaurants, where a mostly young crowd chills on bean bags under umbrellas by the water’s edge.

At night, the scene heats up though. “The party really starts then,” one dive shop owner says.

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Gili Air, where our outrigger drops us off next, is quieter and doesn't thrum to the same beat. A beach club satisfies us with Indonesian *mie goreng* (spicy fried noodles with chicken and veggies) and a swim in the impossibly blue water.

Familiar now with the lay of the land, we're eager to dive. Back to the Gilis we go another day, where 20 dive sites suited to all diving levels are a short outrigger ride away.

The clear 28-degree water feels almost bathtub warm. Although some coral reefs have been damaged by fish bombing (now illegal), we drift over other sections of beautiful crayola-coloured coral gardens on our first dive.

We spy a nurse shark underneath a coral ledge, moray eels, tiny seahorses hiding in purple fan corals, gently fluttering lionfish and small lobster. And that's on top of the clouds of parrotfish, angelfish and Moorish idol.

But the sea turtles on our second dive trump all that. The Gilis are called the "turtle capital of the world." An enormous turtle rivets our attention. Totally ignoring us, it goes about its business, breaking off chunks of coral with its beak, digging for food.

In the sticky heat, it's tempting to spend all our time underwater, poolside or by the pristine white sand beach fronting our second hotel, the delightful Tugu Lombok. But we also want to hike on Lombok to two waterfalls we'd read about.

The two-hour drive takes us past emerald rice fields, lush jungle hills and volcanic black sand beaches with fishing boats bobbing offshore. Senaru is our destination.

The village is the gateway to Mt. Rinjani National Park, where adventurous trekkers guided by porters climb on multi-day trips to the top of the massive volcano which towers over the island. By comparison, ours will be a mere walk in the park.

"Where you from?" asks Opik, our 17-year-old guide, hired from the village by our driver.

"Canada."

"You know Justin Bieber?" he asks with a hopeful grin as he skips along in flip-flops.

We laugh, sorry to disappoint him.

The narrow trail winds through rainforest along an irrigation channel cut into the edge of a cliff. One misstep and we could tumble down into a deep ravine on the other side.

We pass a few shy macaque monkeys, then are briefly startled by some shadowy, seemingly human shapes swinging high in the trees above. "Mini gorillas," Opik calls them. (Googling later reveals they are rare, black ebony leaf monkeys.)

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We soon reach Sendang Gile waterfall. Very pretty, but we're continuing on to the second, more spectacular Tiu Kelep falls. We wade across a river, picking our way around boulders.

And then we reach "the bridge," described as "very DANGEROUS – fall and you're DEAD!" by one *TripAdvisor* reviewer. Okaaaay... Turns out it's one-metre wide, with a knee-high railing on just one side (how goofy is that?) over a yawning gorge that makes you dizzy peeking over the edge.

Opik comes to the rescue and leads us across individually.



Tiu Kelep Falls is a great place to cool off after a strenuous hike and to admire Lombok's beauty

And the second waterfall is indeed worth getting to. In the pool beneath two thundering torrents of water, we cool off with a delicious swim.

On the return, Opik suddenly jumps backward. A green snake is slithering across the path in front. We're not overly fazed – we'd been told the black snakes are poisonous, but the green snakes are harmless. But perhaps, understandably, locals dislike all snakes.

Back at our hotel, we could do with a massage.

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Great massages are cheap on Lombok. Prices at good hotel spas average \$30 for one-hour massages with all the little luxuries – robes, candles, lemongrass tea.

Maybe we should add massages to Lombok's allure?



The Qunci Villas has three slate infinity pools that provide spectacular settings for watching an oceanfront sunset – photo Qunci Villas

IF YOU GO:

Getting there

- Combine Bali and Lombok for the ideal trip. From Vancouver, China Airlines has flights to Bali for as low as \$1,000. We flew EVA Air via Taipei (about \$1,150).
- From Bali, it's a 2½-hour boat ride with Blue Water Express to Lombok.
www.bluewater-express.com

Where to stay

- In Senggigi, the island's most upscale tourist area, the four-star Qunci Villas has three slate infinity pools overlooking the sea, and its reasonably-priced restaurants are excellent. Stylish rooms have outdoor showers.
www.QunciVillas.com
- On unspoiled Sire Beach, the five-star Tugu Lombok ups the wow factor with Indonesian antiques and artworks and individually decorated rooms and villas, some with private pools overlooking the sea.
www.tuguhotels.com/lombok

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Tours and activities

- We booked our dives with DSM Dive, a safe, five-star PADI operator on Lombok.
www.dsmlombok.com
- For snorkeling or a lift to see Gili T and Gili Air, contact Bagus Divers.
www.bagusdivers.com

Practical tips

- Lombok is hot and humid year-round. The best time to visit is the dry season from April to October.
- Check if you should take anti-malarial precautions.