







Sandalwood incense scents the

Above: A Balinese dancer at a traditional Barong ceremony in Bali.

Facing page (clockwise from top left):

A procession of Balinese women carrying religious offerings on their heads for a festival.

The Pura Luhur Uluwatu temple is situated dramatically on southern Bali's Bukit Peninsula.

Statue of Ganesha, the elephantheaded Hindu god of success.

Baby macaque in Ubud's Sacred Monkey Forest. humid air as we cycle under curving arcs of bamboo decorations interwoven with frangipani and palm leaf. The 12-foot-tall flowered decorations wave like flags at every street corner of every village we pedal through. We're a bit off the tourist track, visiting Bali's southwest coast, and it's the first day of the lavish Galungan festival, celebrated every 210 days. Villagers are heading to their local temples. Women in rainbowhued skirts and white lace blouses gracefully balance baskets of fruit and flower offerings on their heads. Men, resplendent in loose white tunics, ride by on scooters. Children are everywhere. Bells tinkle. And everyone greets us with face-splitting smiles and a cheerful "Good morning!"

Bali – the "island of the gods" – and its friendly people have fascinated visitors ever since European artists first made this remote tropical island world-famous in the 1930s.

Today, sporty types come for its epic surfing and scuba-diving. Luxury devotees are lured by its five-star resorts and awesome spas – can you say "indulgence"? The Kuta area, shunned by many as over-crowded and noisy, is sought out by others for its miles-long beach and throbbing nightlife. Yoga fans find mantra heaven gazing out over Bali's terraced rice paddies.

And then there's Bali's traditional village life, art, dance and festivals. The island's unique culture valuing balance and harmony is a chief attraction, and Balinese traditions fired by the belief that spirits inhabit the sacred mountains, trees, animals and all living things - are embedded in daily life. Tiny palm-leaf tray offerings, sprinkled with flower blossoms and a few grains of rice, greet us daily outside every shop, house and temple and colorful Javanese Hindu-based festivals like the Galungan are celebrated yearround.



on a dance performance at the Ubud Palace. Under a starlit sky, two young women perform the classic "Legong" dance, accompanied by a gamelan orchestra's xylophone rhythms. Wearing glittering headdresses, they move in perfect stylized sync, emotions vividly expressed by darting eyes alone. Then a whole cast of actors in fantastic costumes, including girls dressed as golden deer, enacts the Hindu "Ramayana" love epic.

We're so enthralled that over the next few evenings, we take in several other performances – like the "Barong" lion dance and the "Kecak," where 100 men chant in a trance-like state and a fire-walker in a horse costume dances barefoot on blazing coconut husks.

There's much else to do in Ubud. We visit some of the art galleries around town – so chock-full, original oils and acrylics lean in piles against the walls. Growing rice on the island traditionally allowed the Balinese plenty of spare time, so painting became part of daily life.









It's the festivals that really capture the welcoming spirit of the Balinese.







This page (clockwise from top left):

Tiny palm leaf baskets of offerings to the Gods, filled with flower petals and rice.

A priest offers blessings to begin a Barong ceremony. An artist creates an intricate traditional Balinese painting.

Out in the countryside, simple artist-owned stalls sell original art works in a wide range of styles paintings, drawings, sculpture, wood carvings, even intricately painted eggs and masks hand-carved from bamboo - much of it good and cheaper than in Ubud's galleries. Keen on the art, we spend some enjoyable hours at the Neka Art Museum. The history of Balinese art is laid out, from early puppet-style canvasses onward. Some later styles were inspired by Bali-mad European artists like Walter Spies and Adrien-Jean Le Mayeur - lured to Bali in the 1900s by the beauty of Bali and its people.

What about Bali's beaches? Perhaps the best beaches and top surfing spots on the island are found on the Bukit peninsula on Bali's southern coast. Surfers first discovered this beautiful arid island-teardrop (Bukit to its friends). For big fast surfing waves, head to Uluwatu Beach right under the cliff-hanging, one of Bali's oldest temples.

The peninsula is also home to Nusa Dua. This planned five-star resort community is where you find long stretches of swimmable gold sand beaches and manicured lawns with beach chairs and umbrellas for the St. Regis, Westin, Melia and other brand-name resorts. As we cycle along its stone beachfront path, Nusa Dua reminds us a little of a fancy Hawaii resort area, only more exotic with its stone statues of Garuda sun birds and Hindu gods guarding beach resort entrances. At sunset, we reach a public park with huge Ramayana stone statues, where locals and tourists alike are strolling and jogging.

We treat ourselves to massages. Balinese massage is a relaxing combination of thumb and fist pressure, long kneading strokes and gentle stretching. It costs far less than in North America, and many spas top the pleasure meter with luxurious add-ons.

Take the Four Seasons spa at Sayan (near Ubud), where we cross lotus ponds to reach a private indoor/ outdoor spa villa for our couples treatment. After our feet are gently cleaned and perfumed, we're rubbed with a warm poppy and rose oil scrub. Then we luxuriate in an outdoor bath strewn with rose petals, while served a soothing rose elixir. A deliciously skilful massage follows. Talk about bliss!

But for us, it's the festivals that really capture the welcoming spirit of the Balinese. One day walking to Sayan village, we stumble across preparations for an evening temple festival. Men huddle in groups over charcoal fires on the ground, chatting contentedly as they grill bamboo skewers wrapped with shredded pork, ginger and coconut. They invite us to share some - delicious! Women weave palm leaf baskets for offerings, which they pin in shape with bamboo slivers and fill with flower petals. It's all so peaceful, so happy, so serene that we're hard-pressed to tear ourselves away and return to our own lives.

IF YOU GO: Cathay Pacific, EVA Air and other airlines fly to Denpasar, Bali, via Hong Kong or Taipei (flights from North America are as low as \$1,100). Most resorts arrange airport transfers, and luxury hotels around Ubud offer complimentary shuttle service to Ubud town. The best time to visit Bali is the dry season from April to October





Four Seasons Jimbaran Bay

Over on the island's south coast, the Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay is built like a traditional Balinese village. Clinging to a hillside overlooking the sea, groups of about 20 villas are clustered around seven squares. One-bedroom villas comprise three thatchedroof pavilions - an outdoor living area, indoor air-conditioned bedroom and bathing pavilion, with an outdoor shower in a small private garden. For dinner one evening, we walked to Jimbaran Bay, where a string of simple seafood restaurants had tables and chairs in the sand, but the "wow" place to be was the Four Season's hip new Sundara beach club. By day, guests stake out double daybeds by the infinity pool and sip on hand-crafted cocktails (admission fee). At night, Sundara transforms into a sexy seafood eatery, where DJs spin tunes into the wee hours.







The Kunja and the One Villas

Villa rentals - complete with maid service, swimming pools and kitchens - are popular in Bali's trendy, upscale Seminyak area. The Kunja and the One Villas, skilfully run by the same management company, more than met our requirements for luxury villa stays with hotel-like services.

Contemporary in design, the Kunja has 14 one-bedroom and four three-bedroom villas. In our one-bedroom holiday home, the air-conditioned, all-white marble bedroom opened onto a breezy open-air living area (visited sometimes by tiny geckos). The small swimming pool had a shallow side beside the deck for sunning while lying in the water. Decorated with a single white orchid, the minimalist bathroom was beachy in feel with white pebbles scattered around stone slabs on the floor.

We prefered the One Villas, however. More Balinese and traditional in style, these one-bedroom villas had thatched roofs, separate sleeping and

living pavilions, and lush tropical gardens surrounding the pools (we always heard birds chirping). Our bedroom had polished wood floors and black-and-white, 1930s photos of Balinese girls adorning the walls. There were no walls on two sides of the bathroom - which looked out over fern gardens and shady palms.

When it was time for breakfast (included in the rates at both properties), a maid carrying a wicker basket of supplies came to the villa to cook our eggs and slice fresh fruit. A phone call netted us complimentary afternoon tea and cookies. We were also chauffeured to nearby beach clubs and Seminyak's buzzing bars and restaurants whenever we wanted. Airport transfers (courtesy of the villas) were offered too - with cold towels, water and chilled fruit supplied on the way.

For honeymooners, couples and families who want a quiet, serene and private retreat in the heart of lively Seminyak, these villas hit the mark.