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BALI BEYOND THE BEACHES

Verdant landscapes, a vibrant arts scene and traditional Balinese culture make Ubud a one-of-a-kind travel destination



Rice fields at the heart of Mandapa, The Ritz-Carlton's property in a dramatic valley surrounded by forested cliffs

"As soon as you land, you can feel you're coming to a different world – with the smell, the music, the visuals, everything," Indonesian artist S Teddy Darmawan tells me, explaining that he makes a pilgrimage to Bali three times a year. While most flock to the island for sand and surf or Eat Pray Love-type holidays, there's much more to this tourist destination. Along with Yogyakarta and Bandung, it's one of the country's bustling art hubs.

Creativity spills onto the streets of Bali. On every second corner are craftsmen blowing glass, cutting into slabs of stone. Roughly hewn fragments of wood sit ready to be carved, and rows of Buddha heads and Hindu gods from the fables of the revered *Ramayana* greet passers-by with serene expressions.

Art and tourism have long gone hand in hand in Bali. When tourism took hold here in the 1920s, Holland's Royal Packet Navigation Company would often drop passengers on the north coast. More discerning travellers ventured into the emerald hills of Ubud, where, in the absence of hotels, they would decamp in Prince Tjokorda Gde Agung Sukawati's bungalows, built for the coterie of artists he patronised. Among the world's most colourful artist colonies at the time, Ubud was transformed by Moscow-born German artist Walter Spies, who became intoxicated with Balinese landscapes, and other foreign artists including Rudolf Bonnet and Willem Gerard Hofker.

Fast-forward to the present, and the lush town remains the beating heart of Bali's art scene. Hong Kong gallerist Sin Sin Man, who's been travelling to Indonesia for years, plans to bring groups on art tours through Ubud and surrounding areas, hosting them in luxury villas she built with an Italian architect friend. She describes the island as "a magnet" that continues to exert a pull on her. "The world is so big – you have many places to go, but I keep going back to Bali," says Man. "The energy is so strong."

Ubud may have become synonymous with backpackers and yogis, but it's now once again drawing a discriminating elite – and a growing number of luxury hotels. Last summer The Ritz-Carlton opened the secluded Mandapa, only the third

property in its luxury Reserve collection.

Piles of construction rubble outside the hotel's entrance belie what's concealed inside. Past the small lane, my car starts a steep descent into the main driveway. Stepping into the lobby, I realise I'm standing above a deep, lushly forested valley. About 100 metres below are rolling paddy fields and clusters of villas that arc gently around the Ayung River. Gazing around at the rich tropical landscape, I feel as if I've entered a scene from *Jurassic Park*. The property, built right into the wild terrain, took more than two years to complete. The intention was for the grounds to evoke a traditional Balinese village. A temple has been kept intact on the property, and rice is harvested on terraces. To maintain a sense of intimacy, the hotel has just 60 villas and suites.

On the way to my villa, I spot men navigating down a steep slope with a large, vibrant painting teetering above their heads. Floor-to-ceiling Balinese paintings of dense forest scenes and vignettes of village life are central features of the elegant villas. Mine boasts a separate study, perched right above the gurgling

river. An infinity pool sits at the foot of the villa, below towering cliffs shrouded with forest. "Many years ago in Indonesia, all the important people working in the government used to have a *patih*, so that's the name we gave to our butlers," says Director of Rooms Rafael Gonzalez, explaining that much of the hotel concept draws on local history. While the property seems remote, its proximity to Ubud's cultural hotspots is key, Gonzalez adds.

Although Ubud's streets remain rife with tourist trinkets, and hippies abound, just outside the hotel are small pockets of peace that transport you back in time, such as Museum Puri Lukisan, set among ancient-looking gardens dotted with temple-like gateways and structures.

After an early morning yoga session under the forest canopy, I head to the museum for a gamelan lesson. My teacher, Wayan, is a gentle-natured veteran from the Ubud Palace orchestra. The son of a gamelan player, he explains that the mystical-sounding instrument is part of Bali's lifeblood, central to ceremonies across the island. While it looks like a simple xylophone, coaxing music out



of a metallophone proves surprisingly difficult. I begin by creating a sputtering clangour, but by the end of the morning I'm attempting interlocking melodies and managing to create harmonious chimes slightly more sophisticated than kids might make while playing nursery rhymes.

The museum encapsulates the spirit of Bali's arts, which remain deeply rooted in

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Clockwise from above: A gate at Museum Puri Lukisan; detail of a gamelan orchestra; Tonyraka Gallery; traditional wood carving

and media. In the centre of the entryway, on a wooden platform, lies a scattering of traditional water urns wrapped with rope, evocative of an installation by a contemporary artist. Explosive paintings by Balinese artists such as I Nyoman Erawan sit beside pieces from the gallery's rich collection of Indonesian tribal works.

More than just a bricolage of antiquities and contemporary art, the gallery also offers a chance to nose around Mas Village, one of Bali's major woodcarving centres, where you can watch craftsmen work their magic using skills passed down through generations.

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At the end of my trip, my suitcases are swollen with artwork because it's impossible to leave Bali empty-handed. The soul of Ubud that once entranced artists like Spies still exists, with local craftsmen generously inviting visitors to enter into their spirited art scene, allowing them to be transported back in time to another world.

tradition. Along with stunning displays of Balinese paintings and works by masters such as sculptor and architect I Gusti Nyoman Lempad, it offers lessons in flute playing, batik, mask painting, Balinese dance, shadow puppetry and wood carving. The courses are an incredible way to be welcomed into the culture, rather than simply gazing in from outside.

Also woven into the fabric of Ubud's art havens is a buzzing restaurant scene. Locals flock to vegetarian favourites like The Elephant, perched above the verdant Tjampuhan Ridge and perfect for healthy

brunches. For more formal dinners, those in the know go to Mozaic, which serves creative French fare with Indonesian influences. Chef-owner Chris Salans' concoctions include Tasmanian Salmon cooked in Balinese *Basa Gede* Oil with Shaved Fennel and Kaffir Lime Dressing, and Rice Husk Smoked Duck Breast and Chilled Foie Gras with Sundanese *Kluwek*, Beetroot and Anise Herbs.

The next day, I head south to the Tonyraka Gallery. While it's one of Bali's leading contemporary art spaces, it displays works spanning various periods