

Bali may not be an island paradise anymore, but there are still private paradises tucked away where you can be kings or queens of all you survey. You just have to know where they are and how to make the most of them.

Part 1: The Villa Advantage

There are some lovely hotels and resorts in Bali that are great if you're happy to have lots of people around. If you're travelling with kids, having other children around can be a godsend. However, you may want to get away from it all with some friends or visiting relatives and not have to worry about the general public. For this, villas are just perfect — and there are some perfect villas out there.

As a long-timer in Asia, I got the opportunity to see Bali in the eyes of the uninitiated when I took a friend there recently. I think he was pretty shocked by the “unfinished” look of much of it, by the relative poverty and by the amount of traffic on the roads. As we wound our way down smaller and smaller roads, narrowly missing the dogs and villagers, his eyes got wider and wider. It wasn't looking much like *Eat, Pray, Love!*

Then we arrived at our villa and two men dressed in the standard Balinese white-checked dress opened the door of the car and we were invited inside “paradise”. And I felt huge relief that I hadn't dragged him halfway across the world to be disappointed. We stayed there three nights and then moved to another villa that was completely different but also impressive. Both were perfect for when you're travelling with a group but still want some of your own space to breathe — if you know what I mean!

Staying in a villa has its pros and cons. They're often located away from the shops and nightlife, though most villas do come with a car and driver either included or at an additional cost. The driver will take you wherever you want to go, stay nearby, and drive you home at whatever time of night. Everyone can party!

The ratio between staff and guests is high, and if you're not used to being waited on hand and foot it can feel a bit uncomfortable. It's important to state how much privacy you want, and much better to do this with a discussion at the outset rather than get annoyed because there are always people around. Most villas have a living area where staff can stay out of the way and only emerge when you give them a call.

Of course, there are plenty of other beautiful parts of Bali aside from luxury villas: the paddy fields, the sunsets and many of the beaches, too. I do like the traditional dress — everyone looks so elegant in it — and also the way that the spiritual side and temple life are still everyday aspects for so many inhabitants. And then there's the shopping! I love the colours and fabrics of the boutiques along and around Seminyak, in the Legian area and in Ubud as well. At around \$25 to \$50 for a dress, it almost covers the cost of the airfare.

Recommendations:

- Clothes shopping: Sol & Luna and Frocks in Seminyak; there are quite a few Sol & Luna outlets and they are continually restocking. Body & Soul, Biasa and Bamboo Blonde are also worth looking at, though they can be a bit erratic. By the Sea is good for kids' clothes especially and also for cool men's cotton shirts.

- Home décor: There are plenty of shops like Pigment Rouge and Cempaka that have a contemporary tropical mix as well as the more traditional trade. Kerobokan, Seminyak and Legian all have lots of little boutiques for lamps, lights, tableware and glassware.
- I like flying KLM; the timing is perfect as it gets you there in the early evening and you leave at night so you have the whole final day, And the food is generally good!
- Elite Havens manages over 160 villas in Bali, so have a trawl through the website (elitehavens.com) to find the style and location you're looking for.
- Visa on Arrival is now US\$35 and while the new airport is air-conditioned the queues can still be long; worth the wait, though.
- At the end of the trip, make sure you have enough money for tips and of course the 200,000 Rupiah (around S\$20) for the departure tax! Many people take US and Singapore dollars for if they run out of local currency as both are accepted at most places.
- Remember: to enjoy your holiday to its maximum, you'll need to go into tropical slow mode.

Part2: Group Getaways

*Here are some great Bali villa options for those who are travelling in large groups. They're available to book through luxury villa rental group, **Elite Havens**.*

KABA KABA ESTATE

Arriving at the large and beautiful doors of Kaba Kaba Estate felt a bit like going down the rabbit hole in Alice in Wonderland. From the airport, we'd weaved through villages and fields, the roads becoming more and more narrow until, without warning, we were transported to another world.

The antique wooden doors opened to reveal a staged set of water and lights against a vast backdrop of a carved, cream-coloured stone wall reaching 15 metres in height. Everything else after continued to surprise.

There were statues and dramatic art pieces, a bar on the side of the living area decorated in gold lacquer, a six-metre dining table, and a 25-metre pool with a shallow area studded with lights so it looks like the night sky. When we were being led to our master bedroom in the larger "wing" of the villa, we walked through a reading room that looks like it's from a fairy tale.

The villa is set on three acres of beautifully manicured gardens, including a duck pond — very British! There's plenty to keep everyone occupied, too, from croquet and a full-size tennis court to a games room, a gym and several bikes. There's also a media room with a Moroccan theme.

Kaba Kaba has three separate wings of two or three bedrooms each, and all three have a completely different feel and décor, it's a perfect layout for a gathering of eight couples or several families; one of the rooms has two sets of bunk beds for children. Our wing, called Beringkit, had a large four-poster bed looking over its own pool and on to the fields beyond. The bathroom was pure luxury. We thought the name of the wing described it perfectly: it sounded like "Bring it on!"

Kaba Kaba has whatever it takes for a wedding or a larger event, too, in case you're looking for a venue. The views over the fields behind are open and a great setting for photos, and there's also a roof terrace with a bar for sundowners,

The food is definitely worthy of a wedding; you have a choice of Eastern and Western dishes, and all the meals we had were excellent. The head of staff used to work in an Aman resort, so the standards are extremely high.

You don't have to go far to be pampered either, as there's a gorgeous, two-bed, semi-outdoor spa room, and for only \$12 an hour you can have a massage every day, if you feel like it.

The villa is in the Tabanan area, about 50 minutes from the airport in night traffic, and about 20 minutes to Seminyak one way and Tanah Lot temple the other. Watching the sunset at Tanah Lot with a cold Bintang beer is the perfect way to end a day, even though it may not sound too spiritual. The place is a bit touristy with lots of market stalls but you can whizz past all that to take your pew in one of the cafes up the hill. Nearby Kerobokan has some interesting home décor and furniture stores, and the beach is only a ten-minute drive away at Canggu.

In all, this is a villa that gives you the feeling of being in a very wealthy friend's home rather than a hotel, and of course you can choose to be waited on hand and foot, or do your own thing.

UMAH DAUN

Umah Daun is another great venue for a party and for those travelling in a group. The five bedrooms are spaced far apart from each other, and they're huge, so there's plenty of privacy. In fact, each room is about the size of a one-room apartment. We were in a large bedroom on the top floor that has its own big balcony overlooking the pool; it felt like we were living in a penthouse.

The design is very cool and the building style is grand with super-high ceilings. It's contemporary in feel but with Indonesian touches of colour in the soft furnishings; it feels quite homely.

Umah Daun is perfect for five couples but there are lots of facilities for children, including a media room, billiards room and kids' playroom. It's perhaps not ideal for toddlers as there are quite a few steps, staircases and water features around — you'd really have to keep an eye on them. However, there are plenty of staff on hand if you need help with that.

Speaking of the staff, they're all very friendly, and although we spent a fair amount of time shopping in Seminyak and Kerobokan (neither of which is far away), we did get to enjoy a couple of good meals prepared by the chef.

Picture this: enjoying pre-dinner drinks around the outdoor bar area by the pool and Jacuzzi, then heading to the gorgeous, very long dining table in the main room for dinner prepared by the in-house team – and maybe hitting the bars and clubs in Seminyak afterwards.

The pool and the outdoor living area of Umah Daun are lovely and the view on to smaller semi-urban rice fields is very nice; it does make you feel like the only place in the world you could be is Bali.

VILLA KUBU

Kubu isn't a standalone villa but rather a collection of 17 villas in the heart of Seminyak. Not that you would know that you're surrounded by boutiques and bars; Kubu still manages to feel peaceful and remote thanks to its lush garden settings and mellow vibe. While all of the one, two and three-bedroom villas are large and stylish — and all have their own private pool — the current jewel in the crown is Villa999, Kubu's newest, ultra-luxurious two-bedroom villa. Set around a beautiful *Joglo* (Javanese pavilion), it has a large pool and deck, a thatched-roof balé for snoozing between swims, a massive master bedroom with indoor-outdoor garden bathroom, and a guest bedroom that also has an impressive ensuite area. It's a great villa for entertaining.

Aside from the convenience of being a short walk away from all of Seminyak's attraction, Kubu has the advantage of a hotel infrastructure. For instance, guests have immediate access to the popular onsite spa, Spa Venus, for massages, facials, mani-pedis and more. There's also the Oasis restaurant, or you can just dial up for in-villa dining instead.

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