



Leave the coast and head to Ubud where things are candlelit instead of laser lit and relaxation takes the form of lounging in spas, dining on superb cuisine and browsing eclectic art-filled shops.



FROM TOP:

A locally carved statue enjoys an honoured spot above the Tjampuhan River Gorge.

They're adorable creatures roaming the Monkey Forest but don't give them anything at all.

WHEN A DESTINATION IS REFERRED

to as the "cultural heart" of a place, chances are your radar starts flashing with images of tasteless performances, tired museums and tacky bric-a-brac especially when you're a true frequent traveller. How refreshing then that Ubud, located about an hour north of the Denpasar airport and often referred to as Bali's cultural epicentre, really earns the distinction.

Of course, the usual uninspired assortment of knick-knacks can be found

in a handful of typical souvenir stalls. But look past the brass Buddhas and hippie jewellery and it's possible to discover paintings to rival those in fine European galleries, silks and fabrics crafted by women possessing a masterful sense of colour, and carvings made by hands as precise as machines guided by the warm sensibility of the Balinese soul.

And, unlike other cultural villages, where the locals seem to be on hand simply to serve and be ogled by tourists, the residents of Ubud are busy leading their lives: carrying large loads of cargo on their heads through the rice fields flanking the town; fashioning offerings out of palm fronds and flowers to place on myriad statue-guarded shrines; offering you a taxi ride after practically every 10th step you take; or tending to customers in Ubud's shops and restaurants with generous, childlike smiles.

A BITE OF UBUD

And, my, are there shops and restaurants. A good place to start a day of treasure hunting in Ubud is just outside the infamous Monkey Forest. Best to start outside this iffy attraction because, should you decide to take the short path through it, you might wind up sacrificing water bottles, backpacks, snacks and, possibly, even fingers to hundreds of hungry little monkey mouths. You can see the simians just as well from the entrance before heading up Monkey

Forest Road to seek your bargains. Along the way, stop in at Café Wayan for lunch and a revitalizing coffee.

At the top of Monkey Forest Road you'll come to Jalan Raya Ubud, often referred to as town's "main road". To the left lie more great shopping, dining and galleries. To the right lies madness in the form of the bustling, close-quartered Ubud Market where aggressive vendors will haggle hard to sell you everything from cheaply made backpacks to handmade wooden bowls, pottery, carvings and clothing. The bargains can be mighty but after an hour or so of wandering through this hot and crowded warren of wares, a walk through the Monkey Forest at the opposite end of the street might not seem so daunting.

Beyond Monkey Forest road and Jl. Raya Ubud, streets radiate out like veins on a lotus leaf, and it's worth exploring them all to discover great galleries, unique clothing shops and small cafes. But, after running the gauntlet from the Monkey Forest to the market, you might be more

interested in ducking into one of Ubud's legendary and plentiful spas.

SPECIAL RETREATS

The word Ubud translates as "healing" and there are certainly enough places around town to restore weary feet and achy bodies. For top-of-the-line pampering pay a visit to Maya Ubud just outside of town or the Como Shambala Spa at the Uma Ubud hotel. For more affordable options with very adept therapists you can try Bali Ratu Spa or Jalan Jalan Esthetic Spa near the Arma Museum in town. Treatments frequently start and end with cooling towels and a gingery lemongrass infused herbal tea.

If the tea and treatments aren't enough to make you feel light-headed, head over to Cinta Café on Monkey Forest road to take advantage of their two-for-one mojito special that's offered everyday between 4 and 7pm. You can choose from five fruity varieties of the potent Cuban drink while lounging on pillows in your own thatched bungalow.

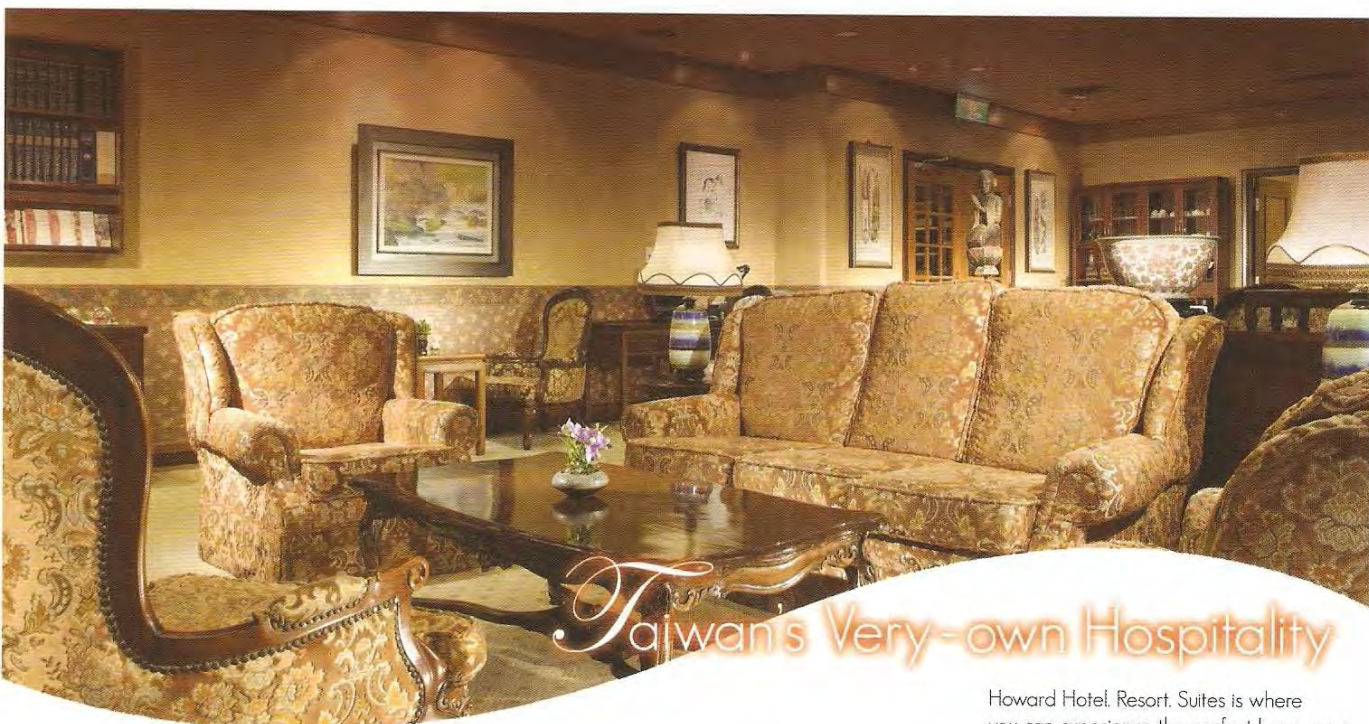
Massaged and mojitoed, it would be

time to return to your hotel to get ready for the evening.

WHEN NIGHT FALLS

Unlike the discos that go bump in the night down in Kuta on Bali's coast, the nightlife in Ubud is candle-lit instead of laser-lit and typically consists of watching a dance at one of the town's many temples followed by dinner. Depending on the night you are in town you can catch either a *legong* dance, where slender and striking Balinese women move everything from eyeballs to fingertips in synchronicity to the gong-like sounds of a gamelan orchestra, or the famous *kecak* dance consisting of a chorus of up to 150 bare-chested men joining voices to create a haunting and a mesmerizing chant.

Dinner is as artistic an affair in Ubud as the dances are. Chefs here are churning out world-class creations at a fraction of the price you'd pay for such fine fare in many other cities. Ary's Warung features extremely creative Indo-European cuisine like *Grilled Salmon with Spinach Gnocchi*



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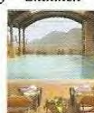
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TOP LEFT - RIGHT:
Doorway to another world or just lunch?
Sometimes they're the same in Ubud.

UBUD essentials

BEDS

Best Deal Ibu Wayan, the owner of Café Wayan in town also owns and oversees three delightful properties: **Alam Indah**, **Alam Shanti** and **Alam Jiwa**. Each is full of character and features clean, spacious and tastefully decorated rooms tended to by a warm and caring staff. The settings might be heavenly, but the prices are down-to-earth and range from US\$65 to \$125.

www.alamindahbali.com

In Town Moderate Even though it's set smack in the middle of Monkey Forest Road, once you pass through the entrance to the **Komaneka Resort**, you may as well have

stepped into a retreat in the middle of the jungle. An infinity pool at the back of the property reinforces the idea that you are floating in the trees and rooms cradle you in comfort. Rates from US\$200 to \$300

www.komaneka.com

Out of Town Luxe In addition to its world-class Como Shambhala Spa, the Uma Ubud offers modern and serene rooms nestled on the hillside above the Oos River. All feature sleek outdoor bathrooms and the pool villas have their own infinity-edge pools with uninterrupted views over the gorge. Rates range from US\$245 (Terrace Room) to \$490 (Shambhala Suite)

www.theumaubud.com

AN AFTERNOON IN THE RICE FIELDS

Don't miss one of the truly magical experiences of a stay here — a walk through the paddy fields that practically glow green or gold depending on the harvest cycle. To find one of the best rambles, have your hotel's shuttle bus (most have one) drop you off at the Hotel Campuhan. Then, simply ask for the entrance to the Keliki Walk, which will take you along the gorge and out to the fields where you can experience the real beauty of Ubud. Bring change because, if you're lucky, you might come upon the farmer who, for just RP20,000 will climb a palm tree and slice open a coconut for you to drink.

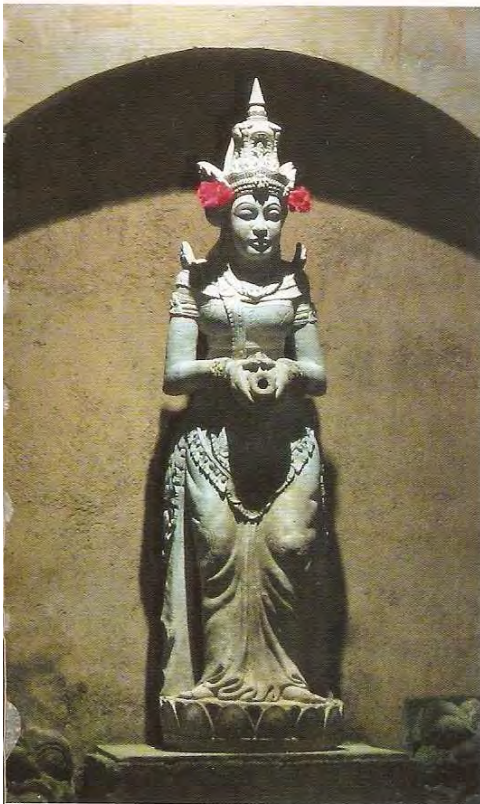
Preparing the day's offerings.

Sign of gratitude and devotion: a *penjor* in the rice paddies.

No statue is complete without a dash of colour from a few hibiscus flowers.

in *Kefir Leaf Broth* served in an open-air, high-design setting. If you're not too hungry, a hip down tempo soundtrack creates the perfect mood in which to enjoy clever cocktails and light bites at the bar. [Aside: Don't miss the *mini koi stream* in the *mod bathroom*.]


Kafe Batan Waru specializes in Indonesian dishes such as *Nasi Campur*, a hugely popular rice-based meal featuring a variety of meats, vegetables, peanuts and other scrumptious fixings you mix up yourself. Jazz Cafe serves up casual eats like pizzas and pastas that you can enjoy to the accompaniment of a rotating selection of live music. Bebek Bengil, sitting amidst a network of scenic rice paddies, is



the place to try out Ubud's signature dish – deep-fried crispy duck.

Simply not to be missed is Mozaic, which is perhaps one of the best dining deals in the world. This palate-pleasing eatery, set in the jungle, delivers an ever-changing tasting menu that will have you swooning at the flavours, not the prices. The cost for the multi-course dining adventure that features such dishes as barramundi with a stew of organic carrots, dried figs, raisins and fresh cilantro is only US\$50. Wine pairings are also available.

After dinner you won't find much left to do except return to the peace and quiet of your hotel which will probably be situated either at the edge of a rice field or perched atop a green-clad gorge.

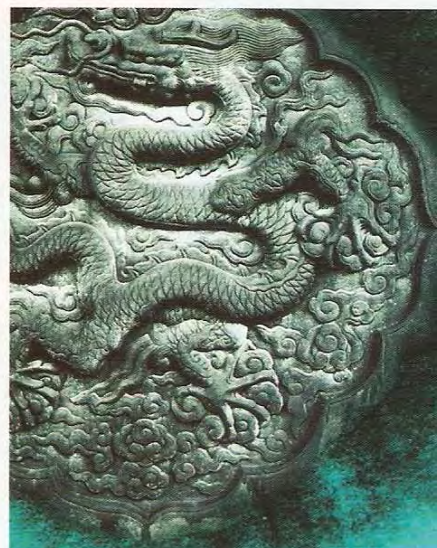
Getting to bed early is perfect because you'll want to wake in time to watch the rice farmers herding ducks through the paddies as you enjoy a traditional Balinese breakfast and welcome another day in this true cultural heartland. 

BOOKS to read

Get around Bali like a pro with the pull out map of **Insight Pocket Guides – Bali** that comes with recommended itineraries such as Sanur, Denpasar and Uluwatu or Nusa Lembongan & Nusa Penida. The map is two – fold: the first part shows the island in general while the second part shows distinct areas



[US\$19.90 | available in major bookstores]



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