



THE BALI TIME FORGOT

It's a favourite destination for seekers of days in the sun and nights on the tiles, but the Indo island lost its allure for many travellers long ago. There's another side to Bali, though. Resident **Mark Eveleigh** takes a slow road trip through its wild west in search of that old-school vibe.

Photography by **Mark Eveleigh**



Rice paddies at dawn.

You'll hear one phrase again and again in West Bali. *Adeng adeng*. It means 'slowly slowly', but more comprehensively it could be said to sum up a relaxed tropical lifestyle that's fast disappearing on the rest of the island.

If you drive out this way you're sure to have had a solid introduction to the adeng adeng philosophy long before you even arrive. If your first introduction to the so-called Island of the Gods was back in the Bintang-and-beach-blanket bedlam of Kuta, there'll come a point in the three-hour drive when you suddenly realise you're breathing slower, sinking deeper into the car seat and the tension in your shoulders has eased for the first time since you dragged your kitbag or surfboard off the baggage carousel.

Welcome to West Bali.

Since I first visited this region 14 years ago I've driven this road more times than I could possibly count. For me, this ritual adeng adeng moment always arrives when the road curves across the lower slopes of Batukaru.

Bali is famous for its paddy fields but there are few other places on the island where such immense rippling landscapes can still be found. The green waves of the paddies descend from the slopes of the volcano until they seem to be on the point of blending with the thundering waves that roll onto the wildest beaches in Bali. Fifty kilometres of unbroken beach lie to the west of this point and, with the exception of a few fishermen, they're almost completely deserted. Inland from the road, mist-draped rainforests rise in a mountain range

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that runs all the way to the north coast and remains virtually unknown to all but a few trappers and hunters.

Bali is one of the most densely populated islands in Indonesia, but here a single chain of small villages clings to the coastal plains. A sign in a Balian beach bar – "Attention: You are now entering a flip-flop zone" – epitomises the laid-back beach vibe for which this village has become known. Sleepy as it is, this easy-going little strip is the busiest tourist town on this entire coastline.

Balian is where the real beauty of rural West Bali begins, yet surprisingly few people take the time to travel any further west, even though Medewi is just 30 minutes away. While Medewi village itself stretches northwards into the paddies, the visitors who do make it here tend to confine their visit to a hundred-metre radius around the beach road. Invariably, they're charmed by the addictively relaxing and welcoming island way of life that is hard to find anywhere in the world these days. The friendly hot shots of Medewi Boardriders are always happy to share a wave and while there's zero in the way of nightlife, it's been said sunset at Made's Warung, taking in that unforgettable view of the volcanoes of Java, has been a cause of countless abandoned trans-Indonesia travel



A traditional fishing community at Perancak.



Modern forms of transportation mean locals rarely use buffalo carts any more.



The rare Bali starling.



A local surfer at Medewi.



A troop of macaques in West Bali National Park.



The West Balinese sport of makepung.



The country's rice agriculture involves cycles in which even flocks of ducks play a part.

plans. Stay more than three days in Medewi, catching Bali's longest wave or working on your yoga moves, and you run the risk of never wanting to leave. I know; it happened to me more than a decade ago. Medewi is a predominantly Muslim village in an area that is rich in culture, even by Balinese standards. Traditional Hindu villages and temples, like the famous Rambut Siwi, stand side by side with towering mosques. There's even a statuesque Catholic church that would be considered a cathedral in most areas. Palasari (near Negara, the regional capital) is Bali's only nominally Catholic village and the Sacred Heart of Jesus church looms like a vision against a jungle backdrop. The huge building seems so out of place I wonder if it is some sort of failed missionary-funded tourist attraction, but local priest Padre Adi Harun claims a congregation that would be the envy of churches everywhere. "We have about 1300 Catholics in the village," he says, "and each Sunday at mass we receive between 700 and 800 of them."

Take a detour off the main coastal road into the great paddy-field hinterland south of Negara city on Sunday mornings and you're likely to find similar-sized crowds gathering for an even more unexpected activity. This is the venue for traditional buffalo-chariot racing known here as *makepung*. Pairs of luridly decorated buffalos charge down rutted dirt tracks at speeds of up to 50 kilometres an hour. Crashes are common, with riders, chariots and buffalo somersaulting into the paddies. Wherever you drive along the southwest coast, a great mass of jungle-clad hills rises from the centre of the island. In 1942 naturalist Charles Barrett wrote of "numerous tigers in the highlands at the western end of Bali, a region covered in dense tropical forest... much of it still unexplored."

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Sadly the last tiger had almost certainly been shot by the time West Bali National Park was founded in 1941, yet, even today, most of those jungle valleys remain unexplored by outsiders. The sheer impenetrability of the forested hills – there are no roads accessing the heart of this wilderness – means the park has remained a safe haven for the monkeys, deer, civets and 160 bird species, including hornbills, living here. Located at the point where the road finally reaches all the way around to the tranquil waters of the north coast, the Menjangan is a boutique resort set in the national park itself. Standing here on the white coral beach, watching wild deer browsing, it is easy to feel a world away from the typical Balinese holiday. "More and more Aussies are realising that they don't need to travel to South America to experience unspoiled tropical wilderness," says naturalist Ruchira Somaweera, Australian owner of Aaranya Wildlife Odysseys, as the deer move fearlessly past us. "There are hidden places much closer to home. We opt for locations that are overlooked by other operators, and offer a chance to see wildlife away from the crowds in undisturbed places. That's where West Bali comes in." Apart from being one of Bali's finest eco-resorts, the Menjangan has become famous as a place to see some of the world's most endangered birds in the wild. An avian gem in gleaming white with a distinctive flash of blue 'eyeliner', the Bali starling is the island's own bird of paradise. The fact it features on the 200 rupiah coin adds to its



allure for wealthy collectors who would pay up to AU\$2800 for a pair of smuggled birds. West Bali National Park now represents the Bali starling’s only remaining endemic habitat. The main breeding centre is in a heavily protected fortress – complete with electric fences, watchtowers and Kalashnikov-toting guards – in the jungle. Another small flock still exists in its traditional territory deep in the park. These birds are also under the close eye of rangers.

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Menjangan Island, lying just a 20-minute boat ride off the northwest coast, is by far the most popular tourist attraction in West Bali, with boats heading out each day to a reef many experienced divers claim is better than those in Fiji or the Maldives. The waters around Menjangan Island are teeming with kaleidoscopic schools of fish, while turtles, white- and black-tipped reef sharks, manta rays and even whale sharks are often seen near the coral walls.

Thanks to its access to Menjangan and its own offshore reefs, the town of Pemuteran has emerged as Bali’s premier dive centre. Still, it remains idyllically peaceful in a way that few places in central Bali have managed. This northern coast is more arid than the south and the cactus-spiked lowlands give way here and there to vineyards. Pemuteran and Lovina, known for its dolphin watching, are becoming more popular as wonderful rainy season holiday bases.

Just before I arrive in Lovina I accept the fact that I’ve now left West Bali. On the way into the town I spot an unusually phrased street sign, reminding travellers of Indonesia’s zero-tolerance laws. “Hide Drugs,” it says. My circumnavigation of the west has come to an end and, once again, I’m reassured to see that the bucolic rural lifestyle that charmed the island’s early visitors is not dead. It just went west.



GET THERE

Jetstar has direct flights from many Australian capitals, as well as Cairns and Townsville, to Denpasar International in Bali. Return fares from Sydney start at about AU\$465. jetstar.com




STAY THERE

Gajah Mina Beach Resort in Balian is a truly idyllic retreat built above the dramatic cliffs. Villas are priced from AU\$160 a night. gajahminaresort.com

Puri Dajuma Beach Eco-Resort can arrange trekking in West Bali National Park. This Medewi resort has ocean-view cottages from about AU\$150 a night and lovely beachfront bungalows from AU\$330 a night. dajuma.com

The Menjangan is set inside the West Bali National Park. The wonderfully appointed beach villas are often visited by Javan deer, known locally as *menjangan*, and you might see Bali starlings and giant black squirrels. Rooms start at about AU\$185. themenjangan.com

Naya Gayana Resort & Spa lies between Menjangan and Pemuteran and is a great base for diving either spot, as well as simply relaxing in one of the most beautiful pools on the island. Bay View Suites, with wonderfully spacious outdoor gardens, are available from AU\$195 a night. nayaresorts.com



TOUR THERE

Aaranya Wildlife Odysseys offers a seven-day Land of Gods package, mostly based in West Bali. Field scientists with a vast knowledge of the fauna and flora act as guides. Group size is limited to six. Prices start at AU\$2950. aaranya.com.au

Low Tide Yoga offers week-long Medewi packages that allow visitors to combine surfing on Bali’s longest lefthander at high tide with twice-daily yoga classes. Prices start at about AU\$1300 a person, twin share, including accommodation at one of Bali’s most beautifully situated shalas, transfers, breakfast, massages, yoga classes and surfboard use. lowtideyoga.guru

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