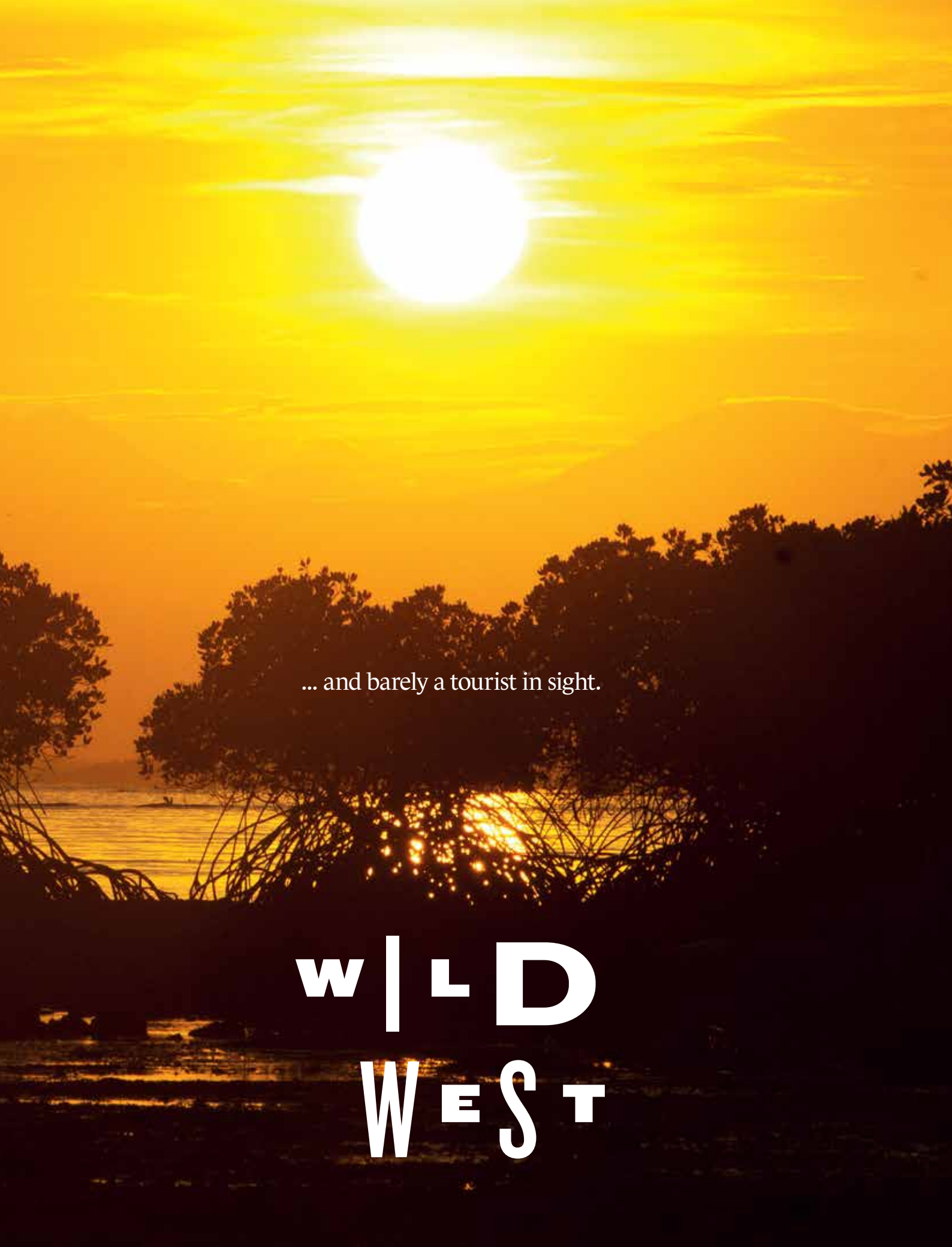


**Mark  
Eveleigh**  
goes beyond  
the crowded  
beaches of  
Kuta and  
the urban  
jungle of  
Seminyak  
to explore  
West Bali,  
a region of  
astonishing  
beauty with  
lush forests,  
shimmering  
crater lakes...





... and barely a tourist in sight.

**w | L D**  
**W E S T**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
MARK EVELEIGH

I'm standing in a seaside rock pool at The Menjangan, a boutique resort nestled in the jungle on Bali's north-west coast, mesmerised by the faint hum of a Madurese fishing boat as it cruises towards the soaring volcanic peaks of Java. As the sun crests a rainforested mountain behind me, it turns the warm, clear water lapping at my feet into shards of burnished copper. Then, as the sound of the vessel fades, it's replaced from the depths of the jungle by the cackle of a kingfisher and the distant cough of a barking deer.



Steeply terraced rice paddy fields have tamed some of West Bali's impenetrable jungle

WHEN Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Bali in 1954, he described it as "the morning of the world". After the phrase was borrowed for the title of the 1971 surf epic *Morning of the Earth*, so many tourists came to chase the Bali dream that it became hard to imagine what Nehru even meant. But here on the remote north-western coast, just 140 kilometres from the crowds of Kuta Beach and three hours from the crammed yoga shalas of Ubud, I feel the equatorial sun on my face and finally understand.

In recent years, increasing numbers of European tourists have ventured west,

yet this unspoilt corner remains virtually unknown to most Australians. It's on the drive north – alongside the brutal canyons and stepped paddy fields of the Ayung River valley and between the lush orchards of Bedugul where tropical fruit trees throw their shadows across unexpected terraces of strawberries – that Bali's shaky reputation as one of the world's most beautiful islands is restored. Rolling westwards along the high ridges of Munduk, crater lakes shimmer like sapphires in the cloud-forests. Finally, the road descends in tyre-squealing switchback curves towards the north-west coast. Tangled

paddy fields ramble up from the coastline in swirling patterns but inland you can see nothing except impenetrable jungle – much of it unexplored by outsiders.

Wilderness guide Putu Suardika has spent six years exploring the forests around The Menjangan. "I grew up in a village just around the bay," he says, "and I've been fascinated by the birds for about as long as I can remember. Most visitors come with one sighting in mind, of course... everybody wants to see Bali starlings."

Also known as the Bali mynah, the island's own bird of paradise is on the verge of



extinction. With West Bali its only natural habitat, a small flock still exists at a heavily protected ranger station farther around the peninsula at Teluk Brumbun. The Menjangan has set up a successful breeding program to create a safe haven for the birds and there are now 10 Bali starlings flying wild in the forests near the resort. As Suardika leads us through the crackling dry-season undergrowth, we catch sight of two of them with their glossy white plumage and startling flash of blue eyeliner.

“They might be beautiful but these birds are just so stupid,” whispers our guide. “They lay their nests in holes in the trees where it is easy for predators – pythons and civets – to get the babies. Or they occupy nests made by other birds. Sometimes the nests are so old that they just fall out of the trees.” A shrug of the shoulders seems to emphasise his frustration that the starlings aren’t doing a little more to help themselves.



EARLY next morning, a boatman takes us to uninhabited Menjangan Island, West Bali’s premier tourist drawcard. Several hundred people come here each day to dive or snorkel a marine reef teeming with kaleidoscopic schools of fish. White- and black-tipped reef sharks and manta rays cruise the deeper waters off the coral wall. Some experienced divers say the experience is equal to the Maldives and Fiji.

“We get wild sharks in the cold season, too,” says our guide as the boat putters around the headland where a glittering temple stands. I trade glances with a group of South African snorkellers as we try to imagine what constitutes “wild” and “cold” here in tropical Bali. Then I realise he’s referring to the whale sharks that visit around May when the water temperature drops to a balmy 19°C.

While Bali is known for its unique Hindu traditions, the “Island of the Gods” nickname takes on more meaning in the far west, the most culturally diverse part of the island. There is a large Muslim population, thanks to Javanese migrants, the Hindu communities are even more vibrantly traditional and there are Buddhist temples and devout Christian settlements that date back to colonial times.

We take the road towards the southern coast and detour before Negara city to visit Palasari, Bali’s only Catholic village, where the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church rises with an unexpectedly regal façade against the steaming jungle backdrop. “We have about 1300 Catholics in the village,” says the local priest, Padre Adi Harun, proudly, “and each Sunday at Mass we receive between 700 and 800.”

Sunday mornings near the paddy fields around Negara are less serene as gaudily painted, buffalo-drawn chariots career



(Clockwise from top) Guests explore The Menjangan; the rare Bali starling; a priest en route to a jungle temple; wilderness guide Putu Suardika (far right) leads a birdwatching excursion in the forest around the resort; hanging lobster claw



(From top) Fishing boats pulled up high and dry on a West Bali beach; Palasari, Bali's only Catholic village



## STAY

[themenjangan.com](http://themenjangan.com)

There are three accommodation options at The Menjangan: the Monsoon Lodge rooms, which are laid out around a pool; the larger Beach Villas, which occupy their own stretch of white sand; and The Residence, a private estate with two double bedrooms and one twin bedroom, all with ensembles. But what's extra-special about this resort is that it offers a unique opportunity to see Indonesian wildlife. The Beach Villas are often visited by sambar deer (known locally as menjangan) and around the Monsoon Lodge rooms, you might be lucky enough to spot Bali starlings and black squirrels bigger than domestic cats.

## EAT

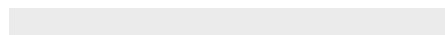
The Menjangan's Bali Tower, which rises above the jungle canopy, has an open-air dining platform. There's also Pantai on the beach, a more exclusive overwater restaurant that features an extensive cocktail menu and some of the best meals in West Bali.

For simpler (and much cheaper) local fare, head to the little warungs (eateries) at Labuhan Lalang jetty, where a heaped plate of nasi goreng will set you back just \$3.50.


around rutted dirt tracks at speeds of up to 50 kilometres an hour in a sport best described as Balinese Ben Hur. For those after a more benevolent form of buffalo transport, the surf town of Medewi now has a beach taxi drawn by bizarre pink water buffalo that have been saved from a painful future as racing beasts.

This sleepy little Muslim town is a mecca for surfers chasing that *Morning of the Earth* dream along the 30-kilometre stretch of black volcanic sand found on the south-west coastline. While the town is often perceived as the poor cousin of Balian, 40 minutes to the east, the cranking left-hander at Medewi can break in a steadily peeling wall for more than 400 metres.

Few who come here pause to turn their faces inland, away from the hypnotic rollers, but rising behind the paddies and the clove and cacao plantations, the jungle-clad slopes of West Bali stand sentinel. Wherever you go in the west, these hills go with you—a reminder that when the rest of the Island of the Gods has been tamed for tourism there will always be a part that remains truly wild. ●



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FLIGHT PATH

# DPS

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[qantas.com](http://qantas.com)