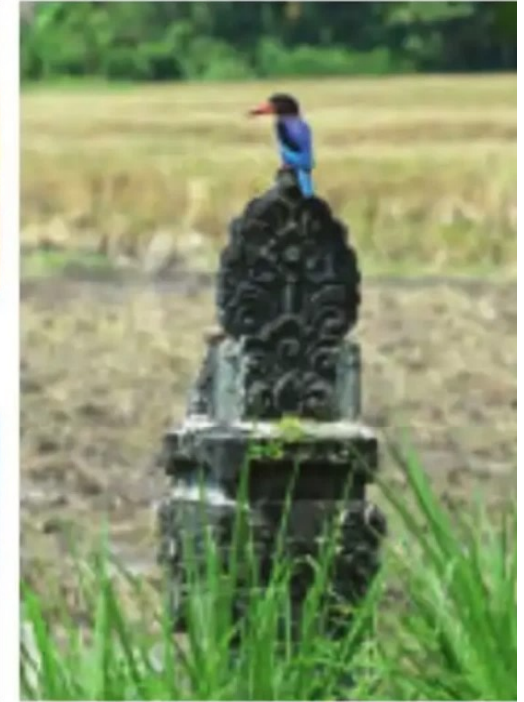


WILD

The forgotten side of the Island of the Gods occupies a third of Bali's total area and remains unspoiled with uninhabited jungle and deserted black-sand beaches. Writer and photographer MARK EVELEIGH ventures on a three-day road trip and discovers its rustic charm

WEST



MARK EVELEIGH | markeveleigh.com

Wild west, page 79

Mark Eveleigh is no stranger to the Indonesian chipelago. His first time to visit was in 1996, when he led an expedition into Central Borneo's "valley of the spirit world" while researching his first book. This month, he writes about West Bali. "I was particularly excited at this assignment brought me into contact with diving monkeys and beach-paddling deer," Mark says.

THE DAWN AIR IS INFUSED WITH CLOVES AS WE DRIVE THROUGH A SHADY ORCHARD

heavy with burgeoning crops of chocolate and coffee. The homely scent of wood-smoke from a dozen breakfast fires catches me, wafting like incense around the shrines that guard a highland hamlet. Suddenly, I am out and among paddies that gleam under the first slanting rays of the tropical sun.

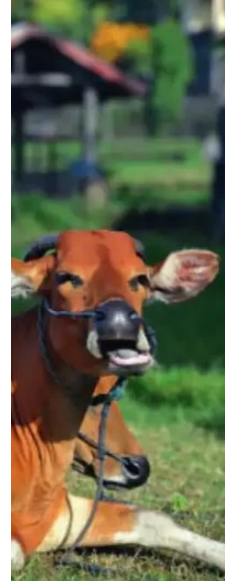
It's day two of a three-day road trip around West Bali, which occupies about a third of Bali's total area and remains an unspoiled region of uninhabited jungle fringed with rural communities and deserted black-sand beaches. Out here, in one of the most unpopulated parts of the island, I feel a world away from the clamoring streets of the holiday centers.

In 1954, Indian politician Jawaharlal Nehru visited Bali and described it as "the morning of the world". These days, few visitors to Indonesia's most heavily toured island get the slightest inkling of what he could ever have meant.

Fifteen years ago, I spent a year living with a farming family in remote West Bali. "When the gods created this island," Sudana, the father, told me at the time, "it was so beautiful they wanted to live here themselves."

I could appreciate their infatuation. For the last five years, my girlfriend, Narina, and I have periodically been based near Medewi. Whenever family or friends visit, we find an almost impish joy in taking them on a road trip that dispels that old myth of a spoiled Bali overrun with tourists. Our visitors this time are Narina's uncle and aunt from South Africa.

We rented a car in Kuta yesterday and took our time with the four-hour drive through the paddies to the west. Our plan: To spend three days



circumnavigating the western end of the island. There aren't many alternative routes, so we'll drive northwards from Pekutatan across the jungle-clad hills to the north coast, then counter-clockwise around the western end of the island.

Adeng-adeng is a Balinese phrase meaning "slowly-slowly". It's a mantra that has lost most of its meaning in the bustling tourist enclaves, but as we drive westward, there is a forested section of road where my heart rate slows, my hands relax on the steering wheel and I heave a sigh of satisfaction. I'm finally back on the side of the island where people have yet to forget the art of *adeng-adeng*.

WE SPENT THE FIRST NIGHT IN THE fishing town of Pekutatan, and it was still dark when we woke to the rumble of waves crashing onto the sweeping bay. As we turn off the main road into the highlands, a few rubber-workers are already tending the historic brick smoke-rooms that are part of Bali's last Dutch-era rubber plantation.

Our first stop is a sacred banyan tree known as Bunut Bolong, which is so massive it covers the road. A tunnel that goes through the center of the trunk allows cars and lorries passage, but I have a decision to make as we approach it: "There's a curse on that tree," Sudana – now one of my neighbors – had warned me. "It's said to be unlucky for any couples who drive through it before they're married."

Such traditions still carry weight in Bali, so much so that the government recently upgraded the bypass road that detours around the tree. Narina and I have driven through the tree countless times but, to show respect, I always tap a salutary hoot on the horn – a sort of mechanical bow – to the shrine that stands among the tree's aerial roots.

We stop at a wide spot in the winding road, in the middle of nowhere, to watch the mist rising out of uninhabited rainforests that stretch westwards for 50km. West Bali National Park was gazetted in 1941 in an attempt to protect the endangered Bali tiger – unfortunately,



THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM RIGHT Motorists ride through the sacred Bunut Bolong banyan tree; a cow taking a rest; a duck herder tends to his flock; animals and birdlife abound in West Bali National Park; one of the region's myriad rice paddies

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
On safari in West Bali National Park; twitchers keep an eye out for rare birds; the elusive Bali starling; mist enveloping the national park; a monkey dries off in the sun after a dip in the Java Sea



the last tiger was believed to have been shot before the park came into existence. This sprawling range of jungle-clad hills, which cover about 600km² or roughly a tenth of Bali's total area, remains largely unexplored. There are still those who talk about the possible existence of tigers.

LATER IN THE DAY, WE START OUR descent towards the north coast where the mirror-like shimmer of the Java Sea contrasts with the raging waves of the southern waters. As the road winds down to hotter and drier climes the terrain begins to remind the South Africans in the car of their cactus-pricked homeland.

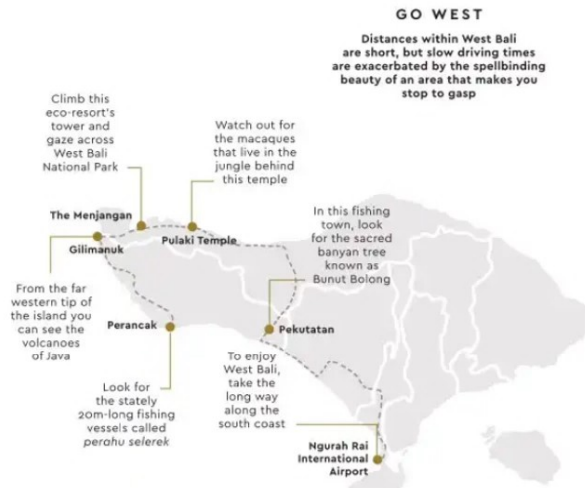
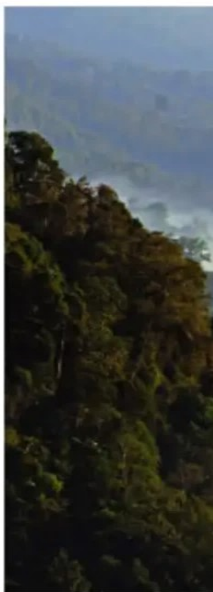


Turning onto the coastal road, we accelerate past scraggy vineyards where the conical hats of grape-pickers swivel like sunflowers. The sun is high and as we pass the seaside temple of Pulaki, we stop to watch a small troop of macaques playing in the water. Visitors who are used to the national parks of South Africa are not likely to be impressed by Balinese wildlife, but we are all stunned to see real-life "sea monkeys" cooling off by swimming through the shallows before sunbathing on the seawall.

Marine monkeys might be one of the most unexpected sights, but the reefs around Pemuteran have plenty to entice even the most discerning divers and snorkelers. In the 1990s, the reefs of Pemuteran were under threat from bad fishing practices, and fishermen hastened their destruction through the use of cyanide and dynamite. Today, Pemuteran is the site of the largest artificial Biorock reef project on the planet. Biorock technology promotes rapid growth of coral through low voltage currents

passed through metal frames. Live corals colonize the frames and the fish return in vast numbers to create habitats that, in a short time, seem anything but artificial.

THE NEXT MORNING – THE THIRD DAY of our road trip – we're on the road before first light again. Our first stop is only about half an hour west, but we have good cause for the early departure. "It's the hottest time of the year so bird life is most active just after sunrise," says Alit Murdiana when we meet him at the five-story lookout tower that serves as the lobby of the Menjangan Eco-Resort. Alit is the birdwatching guide at one of



GO WEST
Distances within West Bali are short, but slow driving times are exacerbated by the spellbinding beauty of an area that makes you stop to gasp



Bali's finest wilderness resorts. From the top of the tower we gaze across West Bali National Park, a forest with over 160 bird and 175 plant species. Alit is just 20 years old and his knowledge is impressive – within half an hour he has already led us to sightings of the elusive banded pitta and Bali starling – Bali's own "bird of paradise", sporting white plumage and a dash of electric blue eyeshadow. In the 1990s, poaching for collectors had brought these birds to the verge of extinction and there were only about 15 left in the wild.



THIS PAGE
Sunda sambar deer move through the shallows

“
Adeng-adeng means “slowly-slowly” and it’s a mantra that has lost most of its meaning in Bali’s bustling tourist enclaves
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“Now there are about 120 flying free in the national park,” Alit says as we watch a breeding pair chattering in the canopy. As we walk through the bush a giant squirrel, bigger than a domestic cat, leaps across a great acacia, and countless deer peer at us.

These Sunda sambar deer are known locally as *menjangan* – the neighboring islet was named after them and has become famous as Bali’s most spectacular diving venue. “These deer are strong swimmers and have often been observed drinking saltwater,” Alit says. The deer are such powerful symbols of seafaring resilience that West Balinese fishermen protect their boats with carved *menjangan* heads mounted on the masts.

HERE, ON THE FAR WESTERN TIP OF THE island, we are a stone’s throw from the volcanoes of Java. Mount Merapi rears above yellow-barked acacias to merge into the clouds, only to reappear where its summit peeks out, nearly 3,000 meters above sea level. Its majesty is so reminiscent of Kilimanjaro, it transports my passengers mentally to Africa again as we drive back towards the southern coast on our homeward journey.

Near the harbor of Gilimanuk, we join the traffic coming from Java and turn eastward. But our West Bali road trip isn’t over yet. Jembrana regency boasts a

WHERE TO STAY

West Bali offers a range of accommodations to suit all comers

The Menjangan Beach Eco-Resort
Set within West Bali National Park, this beautiful family-run retreat is also a great base for diving around Menjangan Island. Rooms begin from \$150 but there are also suites, villas and a 3,000m² residence. themenjangan.com

Puri Dajuma Beach Eco-Resort
Spread over 1.5ha of lush tropical gardens, this 35-room resort has lovely beachfront cottages from \$106. They can also arrange trekking in the National Park. dajuma.com

Bombora Medewi Wave Lodge
Medewi’s legendary left-hand point break can be viewed from this chic 11-room lodge, where rooms start from about \$67. The bar and swimming pool are the best places to chill and watch the waves. bomboramedewi.com



cultural diversity that is hard to find anywhere else on the island. Bali’s Hindu traditions are rich here but you can also find spectacular mosques and even, if you head northwards to the village of Palasari, the Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church. This unique cathedral was built in the distinctive Balinese architectural style and hosts mass for more than a thousand Catholics in the community.

Just south of Negara, the regency’s capital, we visit a village of stilted houses, built by Bugis people from Sulawesi island about 200 years ago. As we stroll through the village, it’s strange to recall that these friendly folk who welcome us into their family homes are descended from the fierce seafarers who were once associated with pirates; the boogymen of childhood nightmares.

Other settlers from the relatively poor island of Madura, off the northeastern coast of Java, established the unique tradition of *makepung* here. In this Balinese version of Ben-Hur chariot-racing, pairs of specially bred buffalo tear along a dirt track at speeds of up to 40km per hour. It’s believed the tradition was started by Madurese farmers who wanted to impress their competition with the speed with which they could get their produce to market.

In the sheltered estuary at Perancak, other Madurese immigrants have created what maritime researcher Jeffrey Mellefont described as “the world’s most spectacular traditional fishing fleet”. There are about 150 stately 20m-long fishing vessels, known as *perahu selerek*, in the river mouth and at the nearby harbor of Pengambangan. The boats are ornately rigged with mythical Hindu



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Bali’s Hindu traditions prevail in Jembrana regency; the Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church; one of the region’s specially bred racing buffaloes



GO YOUR OWN WAY

Driving in Bali can be challenging due to the swarm of motorbikes that seems to follow you like raging bees, often overtaking on both sides at the same time. Because traffic is dense, speeds are rarely high and, as long as you anticipate maneuvers in advance, most drivers find there’s little to be nervous about. Visitors who travel to West Bali, however, often opt to hire a vehicle with a driver included (less than \$60 per day) or arrange a taxi to their base and then rent a motorbike (about \$5 per day) for local sightseeing.





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Perahu selerek fishing
vessels at Perancak; a
boatman throws out a
spring line

chairs for crow's nests, or Muslim mosque domes for mastheads. They are also painted in riots of color, and their presence makes the bay look like it's permanently set up for a carnival. Despite the beauty of this fishing fleet, they are seen by few tourists.

The boats work with purse-seine nets in matching pairs that are considered to be "married" – there's always a slightly larger "male" boat and a smaller "female", and Perancak boatmen consider this relationship so inviolable that when a boat is irreparably damaged, its partner will thereafter be known as a *janda* (widow).

On the beach at Perancak we find Pak Asni heating beams of teak over a fire, bending them into shape to fit the growing hull of a "female" selerek. Pak is one of the last Madurese master boat-builders. "It costs about \$30,000 to build one of these boats," he says as he splashes water on the singed wood.

This part of West Bali is a melting pot of cultures, influenced by communities from all over the region, and Pak is here to spend three months building boats.

"There are very few of these boats in Madura now," he laments. "It's only in Bali that people can afford to commission and maintain these ornate boats. If it wasn't for the fishermen of Perancak, our unique boat-building tradition would likely have died out entirely by now. The Balinese have always had an appreciation for beauty."

Surveying the landscape out of our car windows, it's easy to agree – and to take the final hours of our road trip adeng-adeng.



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