

The spirits of the Balinese highlands seem to have an insatiable taste for chewing gum.

For the third time today, jungle guide Made is making an offering. He carefully decorates a banana leaf with petals, rice, a cigarette and the obligatory gum and places it among the roots of a sacred banyan tree.

He whispers incantations in an ancient tongue, voice respectfully lowered so that the syllables seem almost to dissolve in the haze of incense that swirls around the tree.

“The gods will be happy now,” he says as he rises from his knees. “They know we’ve come here respectfully.”

Very few foreigners, or locals for that matter, take time to explore the remote rainforest peaks and valleys of West Bali National Park.

Yet these 700sqkm offer some of the most accessible and prodigious wildlife sightings in Indonesia. Even

before the trek began, a short drive off the main road brought sightings of three deer species (sambar, barking deer and mousdeer), giant monitor lizards, bush pig and two of the park’s three resident primates.

Macaques are almost ubiquitous on ▶▶

MAIN IMAGE
Rice terrace in
the mountains
BELOW
A full moon
ceremony
welcome dance

Island of the gods

Mark Eveleigh explores Bali’s wild western jungles and beautifully deserted northern beaches





CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW
Traditional instruments; the rare white Bali starling; a traditional village



▶▶ Bali and are notorious for their ‘bandit raids’ on temple offerings (and tourists’ picnics). This park is the only place in the world where you can still see the Balinese black monkey, however, and a curious troop of these lithe and agile little wraiths has followed us all the way to our campsite.

“This place is amazing,” says Brazilian backpacker Laura Nedel, “my country is famous for its jungle-life but I never expected anything so spectacular.”

Since the group will be sleeping in jungle hammocks, there are those who admit to being grateful that there is no longer a chance of seeing a Bali tiger here.

West Bali National Park was gazetted in 1974 specifically as a haven for the tigers. Unfortunately the last of the big cats was shot shortly afterwards, and

these days the park is known as the only place on earth to see the endangered white Bali starling.

There are said to be only 20 of these beautiful birds left in the wild, protected from poachers by a special task force of Kalashnikov-wielding rangers.

The sounds of a jungle night are something that everybody should hear once in their lifetime. There is a primal feeling of wellbeing to be had falling asleep, cosy, protected and dry in a tropical downfall.

And when the rain eases, the whole environment seems to come to life with renewed vigour, so that you could almost swear you can hear the vegetation growing. The harsh cough of barking deer makes the perfect wake-up call.

Made stokes the fire and prepares cups of sugar-sweet Balinese *kopi* for the waking trekkers. “We have a long walk today,” he smiles as he fills the cups, “but no rushing. *Pelan-pelan* – slowly, slowly... it’s the Balinese way.”

The group has broken camp and is ready to move when a strangely familiar sound echoes through the rainforest.

It is exactly like the chug of a steam engine hauling a heavy load up a one-in-five hill. The sound gets steadily louder until a pair of shadows can be seen flapping laboriously over the canopy.

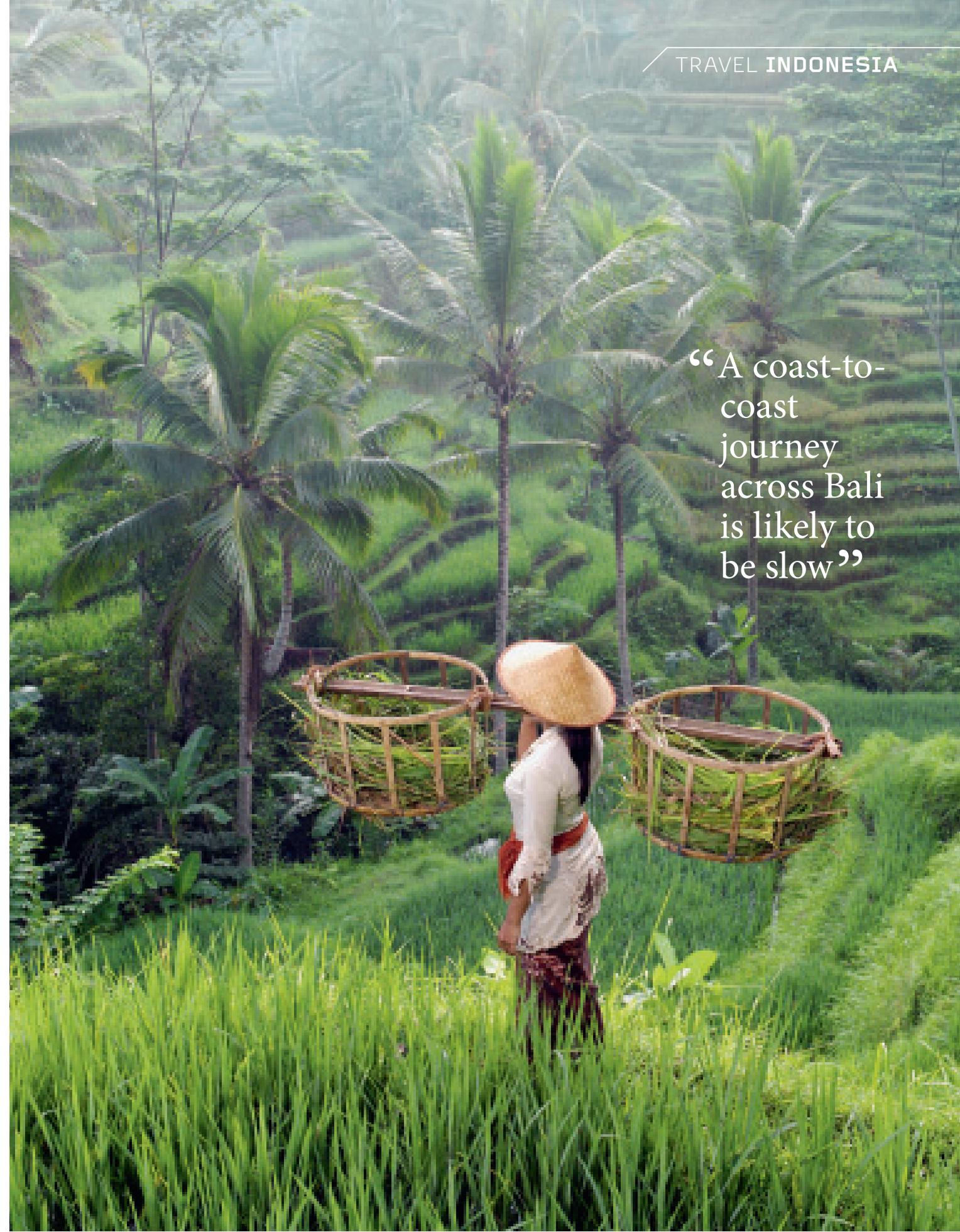
Looking like flying crosses, with their thick casqued bills stretching ahead, there can be no mistaking hornbills.

The air pockets under their wings are responsible for the loud, distinctive chugging sound.

Throughout Indonesia, hornbills are considered a good omen, and the Balinese are beaming smiles by the time the chug of the ‘West Bali Express’ has faded away. It is going to be another good day in the jungle.

“Omens dictate our lives,” Pak Suarjanan, the village chief, is saying as we walk up a dirt track, “and for a wedding as important as today’s we ▶▶

“A coast-to-coast journey across Bali is likely to be slow”





The Balinese Ben Hur

Mekepong, the Balinese sport of buffalo chariot racing, is practised only in Bali's 'wild west'. The area is known for the water buffalo that are still used to work the paddy fields and for the wooden carts that carry the produce to market. These carts have evolved into the lightweight racing chariots that can reach speeds of close to 80kph over the dirt-track courses that run between the paddy fields. Races take place on most Sundays between July and October. At its most dramatic this intense sport is capable of making the international rally circuit look positively tame.



RIGHT Temple complex, at the edge of Lake Bratan
FAR RIGHT Bali's Kuta beach, surf boards for rent



►► can wait months for the priests to declare the right moment.” It is still an hour before dawn yet there are already a few people on the street and candles flicker in most of the stone and bamboo shacks. Only the grunting water buffalo, lying like beached walrus along the road, seem oblivious to the activity. The village pigs are not so lucky and the sound of panicked squealing comes from up ahead. *Babi guling* (spit-roasted pig) is a local delicacy and eight pigs are destined to feed the guests at what is likely to be Bali's wedding of the year. The young son of one of the oldest families on the island is getting married today. “Our people are known as Bali Aga,” Pak Suarjanan explains. “Many say we were the original Balinese.” Long before the arrival of the Dutch colonials, the Indonesian archipelago

(boasting more than 17,000 islands) had seen countless invasions, colonisations and migrations. Experts believe that while the Bali Aga have been here longer than any other group on the ‘island of the gods’, they were probably part of an earlier invasion that drove the original islanders farther west into Sumbawa and Flores. Twenty-four-year-old Komang and his future wife are already busy greeting a long line of guests, when the chief leads the way into their compound. Komang is the youngest son of the village's celebrated *kris* (sword-making) family. His curiously upright posture is caused by the priceless ceremonial sword strapped to his back. His fiancée sits beside him in wedding regalia that includes a crown made almost entirely of gold leaf. A procession

“This jungle is sacred to us, because it's where our forefathers are buried”

of well-wishers is shuffling offerings into the little private temple courtyard without which a Balinese home would not be considered complete. The wooden deck in front of the altar is already groaning under the weight of great heaps of fried chicken, rice, fruit, cakes, cigarettes, Bintang beer... and, no doubt, the odd package of chewing gum. There are only five Bali Aga villages remaining, and Tenganan is the most famous. Everything in the jungle around Tenganan has traditionally been considered sacred so that, even today, it is surrounded by its own pristine Garden of Eden. The Bali Aga here were perhaps the

world's first environmentalists. “This jungle's sacred to us, mostly because it's where our forefathers are buried,” Pak Suarjanan explains. “We bury our dead naked in unmarked graves. It's natural that people should leave the world just as they came into it.” The Balinese are probably unique among the world's island people for the fact that they traditionally feared and shunned the ocean. The beach, especially at night, was considered a cursed place. Just as the volcanic peaks were the natural home of the gods; the sea was the domain of

ghosts and blood-thirsty spirits. Even fishermen built their homes uphill, beyond the evil influence of the sea. Early travellers here were astounded to find that virtually the whole island was circled by pristine, deserted beaches. Colourful fishing skiffs lined the coast in some places (as they still do) but, unless there was work to be done, the beaches were left abandoned. Apart from the far south (the complexes of Nusa Dua and the city beaches around Kuta and Sanur) you can still find countless miles of pristine tropical beaches on Bali. Those who take time to explore ►►

▶▶ are astounded by how easy it is to get away from the crowds.

Simply hire a car (or a car and a driver) and hit the road to Bali's timeless 'wild west' or sleepy north coast.

Very few sight-seeing buses ever make it farther west than the spectacular ocean-side temple of Tanah Lot.

Beyond that point you are really entering old-time Bali, where the fields are still ploughed using water buffalo and where life is dictated by the rice season rather than the tourist season.



The road along the north coast runs from the thickly forested hills of West Bali National Park and past the coastal swamps, thermal springs and offshore reefs near the divers' paradise of Menjangan Island.

There are countless snacking opportunities along the way, at *rumah makan* eateries or roadside fruit stalls with mangos, papayas, furry red rambutans and spiky, foul-smelling but delicious durians.

Lovina Beach is famous for its colourful fishing boats and possibly the most spectacular sunset show in the world. Because of the way the coast twists here, Lovina faces Java. As the sun plummets into the South China Sea (this close to the equator it doesn't simply set) it magically projects the volcanoes of Java onto the blue horizon.

Bali has often been described as the world's most beautiful island, but visitors are frequently astounded by how

varied the landscapes are. You pass through a chain of traditional villages, where old men smoke clove-scented cigarettes and squat among the wicker baskets of fighting cocks.

At any time of the year, you are almost guaranteed to be held up by one of the countless *upacara* temple ceremonies that take place along the road.

The landscapes get steadily more arid as you travel along the north coast until, by the time you reach the little dive centre of Amed in the east, you feel as if you have driven into the desert. You are in the rainy shadow of the mighty volcanoes that are at the spiritual (and literal) heart of Bali.

Any coast-to-coast journey across Bali is often likely to be slow, but it will never be dull. This is neither the time nor the place to rush. Try it and the Balinese will rebuke you mildly with a shake of the head and a smile: "*Pelan-pelan*," they will say, "slowly, slowly."

It is excellent advice. ■

Bali fact file



GETTING THERE

KLM operates a direct, daily flight to Bali Ngurah Rai International Airport from Amsterdam Airport Schiphol.

WHERE TO STAY

Puri Dajuma Cottages (dajuma.com) is one of the most beautiful accommodation options in West Bali. The resort can arrange jungle treks in West Bali National Park with their ace guide Made, or excursions to the buffalo races. West Bali is famous



among divers for the stunning reefs at Menjangan Island, off the north coast.

Mimpi Resort Menjangan (mimpi.com) has stunning villas, thermal plunge pools,

and is close to Menjangan and the national park.

DON'T FORGET

You can take this magazine with you, or read this article again at holland-herald.com.



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