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Houses rule

A rice field retreat and a beach pad in Bali

SUSAN KUROSAWA

Seven friends, seven days for some and comings-and-goings for others, and three birthdays. We can take no chances with our accommodation. As on past Bali group trips, our villa operator of choice is Elite Havens.

The birthday people, including me, are mad March hares, which is rather fortunate as this is a low-season month on the Indonesian holiday isle. While there's the prospect of showers interfering with afternoon cocktails on the lawn, the trade-off is lower tariffs so we upgrade to properties with extra bedrooms and bigger pools.

In the past we've stayed with Elite Havens in the heart of happening Seminyak but now it's time to try the Canggu beachside hub, with one property facing rural scenery, and the second by the sea.

First birthday bolthole is Villa Mana at the village of Babakan near Canggu, a six-bedroom, two-storey house that presents a plain face to the busy street but beyond the double doors opens to a courtyard, water feature and monumental stone colonnade.

Soon revealed is the T-shaped living space with 3.7m-high ceilings and dark polished concrete floors, 17m-long pool tiled in dark green and, beyond, illuminated for our mid-evening arrival, a terraced rice field gleaming in eerie green light.

Then out hops a plump white rabbit (the owner's pet) to enhance the Alice in Wonderland fantasy. We may be down the rabbit hole but what a fantastical place, even more beautiful early next morning, the 180-degree country panorama bathed in gauzy light.

Villa manager Made Purnamayasa oversees breakfast and we meet all the team, including chef Putu who rustles up egg-topped nasi goreng with his "secret" ingredient and, for the evening meal, a spread of beef rendang, green mango salad, gado gado and mie goreng. Anything looks possible in his industrial-sized, gadgety kitchen and guests can help themselves to tea and espresso coffee around the clock.

By day, the pool lacks shade but is the loveliest imaginable, with a water cascade and borders of gnarled old frangipani trees. The stepped gardens are all bananas and bougainvillea, with pigeons cooing and bats swooping; the air feels full of chlorophyll.

Upstairs terraces draped with tumbling greenery all but overhang the water. Big lime-green pool floats make for lazy sun beds while there are hammocks, loungers and even a tucked-tight little cabana with bright aquamarine cushions on the side of a slope.

We don't do much except ponder the reflections of palm trees on the surface of the pool, gather to toast the sensational sunsets and play whimsical games such as spot the bunny. A row of bicycles stands to attention, seemingly mocking our inactivity.

There are vases everywhere of heliconia, tuberose and white orchids. Three of the four downstairs bedrooms

have semi-open rock-walled bathrooms with huge tubs and are screened with tropical foliage while the ensembles of the two upstairs master bedrooms are the size of bachelor pads and as gleaming as operating theatres. Design details include padded silk walls, contemporary batik and ikat textiles, colourful rugs and sliding screen doors.

The second villa, a 3km drive seawards to Nelayan Beach, is Arnalaya Beach House, which sleeps up to 18, so we are punching above our size, but that total includes flexible arrangements for children (the gym can be converted to a twin sleeping chamber) so the more realistic capacity is five double bedrooms across the main three-storey residence and a side annexe, all with wooden decks and floor-to-ceiling windows.

This pad is seriously chic, more flooded with light than Villa Mana, and with interiors that feel almost Japanese in their sparseness and regard for unadorned surfaces and linear layout. Japan meets Java, we decide. Design group Studio Daminato was responsible for the look — beds are canopied in gauzy white, there are no announcing colours, just soothing white, caramel and creamy pastels, from flowers, loose-covered sofas and bed throws to terrazzo bathrooms.

Tables and chairs are of pale teak and rattan, lighting is courtesy of lanterns and candles in big glass holders. There's a 20m saltwater pool with a bordering hedge that offers privacy from the shore beyond. The name, in Sanskrit, means rhythm of the waves, and that is indeed the soundtrack here; with a 35m beach frontage, this has to be one of Bali's best-located villas, and it's a 10-minute walk along the sand for a sunset surf or seafood barbecue at madly busy Echo Beach.

The idle option at both villas is dining in and the kitchen teams need advance notice of what you'd like to eat. There are menus, or just go freestyle, but guests are only charged for ingredients purchased (receipts are provided) but a cash float in US currency needs to be paid up front) plus a 20 per cent service fee.

We stock up on soft drinks, open our duty-free spirits and make sure the pineapple bowl is topped up for foamy, fresh juices around the clock.

At Arnalaya, the indoor dining room, as breezy and delightful as it is, feels too formal so we flop on cushioned lounges in the raised pool bale at all hours listening to the surge of the surf beyond. The concierge service at both villas suggests shops, dining and side-trips but that requires putting on shoes, and we are lazier than intended.

Did I mention Villa Mana has a lawned football patch



Open lounge area, Villa Mana, main; villa staff quietly at work, above left; Arnalaya Beach House, above and below

with goal posts and rooftop office and entertainment space or that Arnalaya features a championship Plexipave tennis court (the owner is a former pro) and a ball machine? But such sportiness at the latter is balanced by a games room and on-site spa for which therapists can be booked for massages and facials.

Villa Mana's curtains of greenery and woodland-like bathrooms give the illusion of being somewhere forested and unreachable. Arnalaya's gardens are trimmed as a golf course, albeit with tricky obstacles of palm trees; statues of Ganesha are garlanded daily with marigolds, gamelan music plays from mysterious sources.

At both villas, staff waft in loose tops and trousers, more effortlessly elegant than our lot, all wild hair and crumpled sarongs.

On our departure day from Arnalaya, I ask operations managers Eka Wibawo and villa manager Oka Juniantara if their staff could assemble for a photograph on the lawn. I expect about half a dozen team members to arrive but they just keep appearing until I realise I will need to switch my iPhone camera to panorama mode. There are the two chefs, Eric and Nyoman, and six butlers, plus security guards and gardeners, and still we are missing who knows how many housekeepers and kitchen hands plus the two on-call spa therapists.

There are enough people here to run a boutique hotel. And maybe that is the point, because villa rentals of this size and level of hands-on attention do have the infrastructure of hotels but you don't have to share the premises with unknown guests.

We secretive seven have bags of space, privacy when needed, and conviviality at mealtimes and in the pool. Does it rain on our parade? Yes, a little, but as the youngest member of the party points out, you get wet swimming anyway.

We pretend both villas are our own holiday homes and feel resentful as we depart that new guests will sleep in our beds, chat with our chefs in our kitchens. But will they have more fun? We doubt that.

The eldest birthday person in our group, who has turned a Big Zero midway through our stay and had a minor crisis at the thought, has forgotten all about this ageing malarkey and now can't wait for an auspicious Bigger Zero reunion at a Bali villa.

The countdown is on.



THE NOT-SO-SECRET SEVEN

Dine and shop in style



PICTURES THIS PAGE: SUSAN KUROSAWA



By day, the pool is the loveliest imaginable, with a water cascade and borders of gnarled old frangipani

DA MARIA BALI: Maurice Terzini, of Iceberg's at Sydney's Bondi Beach, is behind this trattoria that could have been airlifted from the Amalfi Coast and where, management promises, very day is a carefree Saturday. Cocktails are sensational, 30cm pizzas with about a dozen types of toppings are cooked Neapolitan style in lava-stone ovens; or go for house-made pasta, crispy-skinned fish of the day, snapper crudo with tomato, chilli and marjoram, or wood-roasted sardines on bruschetta with tomato and basil. Highlights of the crisp blue, white and primrose decor are tiled fountains, exuberant chandeliers, retro wrought-iron patio furniture, and oval skylights; at the rear is an open courtyard and DJs hit the joint for party time after 10.30pm; damariabali.com.

SALUMERIA TANAH BARAK: An Italian-influenced bar by a Canggu rice-field with shelves of Campari and Aperol and boasting the dirtiest martini on the island? This tiny spot is great for aperitivi and share plates that feature terrific antipasti, cheese, olives and grissini plus robust dishes such as burrata with extra virgin olive oil, basil and Amed sea salt from east Bali or cured tuna with shaved fennel, pomegranate, mint, chilli and tangerine juice. There are oysters and buckets of prawns on "seafood Mondays", bright young bartenders and staff in leather butcher's aprons, royal-blue sofas and low chairs, tiled floors and tiny wire-legged tables. It's an enjoyable transplant with motorbikes speeding past and cultivated crops beyond. Australian chef Geoff Lindsay has masterminded the enterprise and installed a big red hand-cranked slicer for those pressed meats. Open 4pm-11pm; salumeria.asia.

PELTON SUPER SHOP: Would you like some bicycle clips with that? This vegan cafe and artisan cycling store offers "plant-based vibrations" but if you can get past the self-conscious naming of dishes, from Lance Lasagna and Team Taco to Pedal-powered Pancakes and Tandem

Toast, it's a great hangout spot in the thick of Canggu's Jalan Pantai Berawa retail strip. Excellent breakfasts are served from 8am to noon and then the lunch menu powers up until a leisurely 4pm. Fab coffees are made with cashew or almond milk, the house-brewed chai is served with soy and there are four fermented kombucha blends, including passionfruit and vanilla bean; pelotonsupershop.com.

BUNGALOW LIVING: Dangerously close to both Villa Mana and Arnalaya, this tropical-meet-tribal home-ware cottage has recently expanded across Jalan Pantai Berawa in Canggu and features the likes of cotton and linen cushions with palm and pineapple motifs, baskets and coasters detailed with cowrie shells and pompoms, seagrass placemats, and chic macrame sunhats. The cute all-day cafe serves organic food, good coffee, energiser juices, smoothies and fabulous cakes and pastries, including French-style apple pie. Look for teddy bears with name tags (Hello! My name is Jax!) made by local women

Checklist

Download the Elite Havens EH Experience app at the Apple Store for the company's recommended bars, cafes, restaurant, spas and shops on the coast and in Ubud, some of which give discounts or preferential rates to villa guests, including the delightful clothing store Frockk opposite Seminyak Square (revive at Will Meyrick's Malaysian bardiener, Tiger Palm, at the mall's entry). Elite Havens manages and markets more than 150 villas in 11 locations across Bali and Lombok and also has properties in Sri Lanka, The Maldives and Thailand. It is worth signing up for the newsletter to be advised of regular seasonal deals and extra nights. More: elitehavens.com.

• villamana.com
• amalayaeachhouse.com

Salumeria Tanah Barak, above left; Bungalow Living, centre; Da Maria Bali

in difficult circumstances who receive the proceeds via a charity cooperative; bungalowlivingbali.com.

THE JUNGLE TRADER: Also on Jalan Pantai Berawa in Canggu, this store has jungle-green ceramics (bowls, vases, teapots and cups) to suit the decor vibe, rattan baskets and lightshades, fearsome-looking carved masks, coconut-shell kitchen ladles, brass bells with rope pulls, and hand-made embroidered linen tiger and leopard toys made for the store by a women's foundation; instagram.com/thejungletrader.

KIM SOO HOME: It's worth the 10km drive from Canggu to Bali's design-central store, Kim Soo Home on Seminyak's Jalan Kayu Aya, which has recently added The Space Upstairs for themed installations and interiors. The cool white shop is a mecca for lovers of all things Asian and covetable, from wooden deer's heads ready to mount on walls to platters, pots, baskets. There are fragrant soaps and candles, glossy white ginger jars, shibori cushion covers and beachy clothing. The onsite cafe is a fab breakfast spot (ricotta pancakes, barista coffee) and for morning or afternoon tea out come the towering slices of cake — lemon pound, hummingbird, carrot, chocolate-coconut or dulce de leche; kimsoohome.com.

KEVALA CERAMICS: Now seen at many resorts and restaurants, including the Baturiti range exclusive to T&I's all-time fave, Hujan Locale at Ubud, Kevala's handmade table and kitchen wares are charming and original with raised decorations of leaves, flowers, petals, birds, stripes and chevrons. There are shops in Ubud and Petitenget and its products are also sold at the excellent Souq Bali homewares haven and cafe on Jalan Raya Basangkasa in Seminyak; kevalaceramics.com; souqstore.co.

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