

EXPAT LIVING – JANUARY 2011



Bali For First-Timers

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“I’ve been to Bali too” sang Aussie band Redgum back in 1984, which means they beat me to the Indonesian island by at least a quarter of a century. So did lots of people, in fact—especially the expat community in Singapore, who, it seems, have all been to Bali.

My first visit wasn’t until 2009 — and that was just a three-day work trip to Nusa Dua. Finally I managed to return under my own steam a few months ago. To make up for lost time, I decided to do the Bali villa thing, and do it in style — not one villa, but three: a couple in Seminyak and one in Ubud. These villas are giant things to rattle around in alone, so my wife, two children and both sets of grandparents all came along for what was their first Bali break, too. Here’s what we thought.

Seminyak

Villa LeGa

www.villalega.com

The location

Villa LeGa is literally ten feet behind the dunes of barely used Batu Belig Beach. I’ve heard Batu Belig described as “the closest truly rural area to the heart of tourist Bali”, and that seems about right. LeGa, for instance, is just a couple of kilometres north of central Seminyak, yet boasts an entire beachside paddock of grass-chewing cows next door, and a sleepy stone temple under the shade of a massive tree just five metres from its entrance. There’s also a couple of excellent warung overlooking the ocean here. But, happily, not much else.

The sound

If one thing defines Villa LeGa, it’s the invigorating roar of the ocean. (Now I understand the appeal of Bali for surfers: six-foot sets rolled in relentlessly during our stay.) Stand on the second-floor deck with a sea breeze in your face and the waves pounding the shoreline, and you’ll forget about your mundane day job in Singapore in a second. The same deck has a huge all-weather lounge for lazing in while clutching a huge all-weather cocktail at sunset.

The staff

The team here is fun, friendly and competent, from the moment they meet you at the door of the villa after the 30-minute drive from the airport, armed with cold rolled towels and welcome drinks. They’re excellent with kids—love them, in fact — but also patient with groups of adults, six in our case, who tend to get argumentative about everything from dinner orders to who took the last of the ice cubes without making a new batch. (Or is that just us?)

The bathrooms

It's hard to single out one room in particular, especially as the bedrooms are vast affairs with towering four-poster beds, and the living area is as comfortable as you'll experience — Bose technology and the rest — but the bathrooms are stunning. Four of the five ensembles are huge courtyard affairs filled with whole gardens of tropical plants, monsoon showers open to the elements, big white tubs, and mirrors the size of football fields.

Villa Joss

www.villajoss.com

The newness

Bali villas can get a lot of use, and before long they're a bit weathered at the edges. This may have its own charm, though there's something to be said for the pristinely manicured lawns and the springy pillows of the outdoor bale at Villa Joss, which welcomed its first guests in August 2010. The villa (just a few hundred metres from Villa LeGa, but back from the beach so the ocean roar is more of a whisper) takes its name from the owner's daughter, Jocelyn. It could just as easily refer to joss sticks, such is the sense of temple-like calm that pervades the place.

The art

Villa Joss is full of beautiful art, from a stone relief carving of Balinese gamelan musicians inside the main gate — a copy of a 16th-century original from the Majapahit Kingdom, reproduced by a family of local artisans — to the bedroom walls, where you'll find fine art paintings and limited-edition prints by some of Indonesia's best-known artists.

The food

There's a chef and an associate cook at Villa Joss (among other staff), and these guys work wonders. Our highlights ran the gamut from a local prawn dish, asam udang, to black sticky rice pudding at the end of a Western dinner, to a glorious fruit plate at breakfast.

The greenery

Koi ponds, hanging vines, heliconias, lotus flowers— the gardens at Villa Joss are a delight. The centrepiece is a reclining Buddha who lies under a waterfall against one side of the 16-metre pool — the statue was carved in Java from a huge block of river granite. It's not just the garden that's green: the villa design incorporates eco-friendly features such as low-energy lighting and power-saving water heating.

If, like me, you've had precious little experience in renting a Bali villa, here are some of the answers I found to the questions I had.

Villas For Beginners

Why rent a villa when there are plenty of hotels?

A hotel room is fine, but when you go down to the pool, you're jostling for lounge chairs with other guests. For privacy, space and atmosphere, a villa makes great sense. But there's a more practical reason: you'll likely save money. A mid-range villa might be US\$700 a night, but with four couples splitting costs, that suddenly becomes a far cheaper option than a fancy hotel.

How much to rent a place?

Rates range from about US\$300 per night for a more modest (though still comfortable) villa to over \$3,000 for some of the "wow-factor" places located on cliff-tops or secluded beaches (and in the pages of

glossy international magazines). These ultra top-end villas can have as many as 24 staff: butlers, gardeners, cooks, maids, pool cleaners and more. The villas in this story are all in the US\$500 to \$1,000 price bracket, depending on season.

Can I stay for a single night?

Usually there's a minimum stay of two or three nights, but this depends on the season. In fact, lots of factors are affected by whether it's low, middle or high season: availability, price, length of minimum stay. Keep this in mind when planning a trip.

Which villa will suit me the best?

It depends. Do you have young children or is this a romantic break? Perhaps it's a work trip. Do you want to relax or are you up for partying hard? It's best to view an online catalogue (see the info box at the bottom of the page) and study the descriptions of each villa to find the one that suits.

Some of these villas have loads of staff. Does this impact on privacy?

We barely saw the staff at the places we stayed, but we knew they were there because our beds got turned down, towels got replaced around the pool, and so on. In any case, the staff are often wonderful people to get to know, with useful or humorous insights about the local area.

How does the food work?

With most villas, meals can be booked in advance from a "suggestion menu"; the staff will then go and buy ingredients from supermarkets. You only pay for the shopping bill — no extra for the preparation and cooking. (For this reason, a great advantage of villa accommodation in Bali is that dining is cheap.) Feel free to tack on any extras to the shopping order, too. More beer, for instance.

How do I get around the island?

The price of a villa often includes a car and a driver for every day of your stay. Alternatively, the villa staff can make arrangements for you to hire a car for a day, or they'll call a taxi for you. There are plenty of places where you can hire scooters or bicycles, if that's your preference.

Finding a villa to rent

Villa LeGa and Villa Joss are part of the Marketing Villas luxury collection of rental villas. To see the complete collection, visit www.marketingvillas.com. Alternatively, to see independent reviews of these and over 300 villas across Asia, visit www.privatehomesandvillas.com.