

First time Bali: where to eat, stay and play

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Decades of tourism haven't dampened Bali's deep-rooted spirituality and natural charms. Volcanoes rise from the sea, monkeys swing in the trees, and there are still dozens of idyllic spots to escape the crowds. And all of this paradoxical magnificence is crammed onto an island less than half the size of greater Tokyo.

But first-time visitors to Bali can be forgiven for being confused about what to expect – so here's Lonely Planet's guide to finding your own piece of paradise on the Island of the Gods.



Kuta, Legian and Seminyak

Seminyak remains the epitome of sophistication, Kuta plays the wild child, and Legian falls somewhere in between. But this 12km stretch of south Bali boasts diverse shopping, myriad sleeping choices, world-class dining, authentic warungs (food stalls), beach bars, clubs and day spas.

Must-dos include early morning coffee at Revolver; sunset drinks at Potato Head Beach Club; conga lines and coconut cocktails at Motel Mexicola; haggling and people watching on Kuta Beach; and a day of shopping and eating on Jalan Laksmana, also known as Oberoi, Eat Street or Jalan Kayu Aya.



Greater Canggu

The ex-pat enclave of Canggu has well and truly arrived. Greater Canggu, including Umalas, Kerobokan, Echo Beach, Berawa Beach and Pererenan (and to a much lesser extent Seseh and Kedungu beaches) have lured a carefree and creative crowd that drives their scooters from a perfect cocktail at Finns Beach Club to a seaside feast amid bohemian decor at La Laguna.

Bowling, tennis courts, a water park, and trampoline centre are all available at the Canggu Club, and you can join the crowds visiting neighbouring Tabanan's Pura Tanah Lot temple that sits among crashing waves on an isolated rock.

Accommodation in the area is boutique and unique, from luxury hotels like Tugu Bali, to cheaper and central options such as FRii Bali Echo Beach.



Bukit Peninsula, Nusa Dua and Jimbaran Bay

The fist of land jutting out from southern Bali, encompasses diverse tourist centres offering their own versions of a dreamy day at the beach. Bukit Peninsula offers up world-famous waves in Ulu Watu, surf-shack vibes in Bingin, and wonderfully clear waters in Dreamland and Padang Padang. If you've been pawing through holiday brochures, you may recognise one of Ulu's main attractions, the Rock Bar at Ayana Resort, overlooking Jimbaran Bay. An oldie but a goodie, this glamorous venue is accessible by an open-air elevator that is rarely without a sizeable sunset queue.

Jimbaran Bay itself is more low-key. Tourists line up for freshly barbecued seafood, but more adventurous travellers should swap warungs for Jimbaran Fish Market, or head to Seasalt for more upscale dining.

Over at Nusa Dua, elegant and excessive are par for the course, with top-of-the-line golfing (pun intended), umpteen high tea options and five-star resorts aplenty.



Ubud and Central Bali

A haven for the artistic, spiritual and alternative, Ubud is where Bali's heartbeat can be heard and where vegan cafes, crystal shops and chakra cleansing workshops reign supreme. Other drawcards include the Royal Palace, the cheeky inhabitants of the Sacred Monkey Forest Sanctuary, and boho shopping galore.

A swanky trip to Ubud might include a stay at the indulgent Como Uma Ubud and a night of palate-pleasuring at Locavore. A more sea-oriented dining experience awaits at La Cevicheria, specialising in ceviche prepared using authentic Latin-American techniques, while movie buffs shouldn't miss a film with nutritious nosh on the side at Paradiso Ubud, an organic vegetarian restaurant with a 150-seat cinema.

Central Bali's tapestry of wonders stretches well beyond Ubud. The valleys flowing off Gunung Batukaru (Mount Batukaru), rice terraces of Munduk, the lakes and botanical gardens of Bedugul, and holy water bathing site of Tirta Empul Temple are just a few places well worth a visit.



East Bali and Sanur

With arguably the island's best dive spots right off the shores of Amed and Candidasa, and the island's highest point, Gunung Agung, looming authoritatively above them, east Bali is a place of literal highs and lows.

Make time for the floating palace of Puri Taman Ujung and seek out the quaint fishing village of Amed, home to the jam/tea/kombucha garden of Aiona, great villas (such as Griya Villas and Spa), and restaurants offering every variation of mahi-mahi under the scorching Indonesian sun.

Sanur blends the best of the laid-back fishing village feel of the east and the great dining and lodging on offer in the south. Try your hand at kite surfing or learn the intricacies of Indonesia's culinary favourites at Bamboo Shoots cooking school. Coincide your visit with the International Kite Festival (usually in July and August) to see Sanur in full swing.

North Bali

In north Bali, days start with dolphin-watching trips from Lovina in traditional outrigger canoes, followed by long afternoons bathing in the mossy air terjun (waterfalls) of Sekumpul, Gitgit and Sambangan. Be prepared for a few stairs, but, as a general rule, more stairs equal smaller crowds.

For a window into Bali's past, swing by the town of Singaraja, the administrative centre of Bali during Dutch colonial times and, until the boom of the south, the port of arrival for most visitors.



West Bali

Many travellers can't look beyond west Bali as the gateway to good surf, blazing their way to Medewi or Java. All the while, they are skirting the stunning Taman Taman Nasional Bali Barat (West Bali National Park), with its calm, secluded beaches that are home to families of wild deer, and missing out on unique regional flavours like ayam betutu, a wood-smoked chicken broth.

Menjangan Island offers one of Bali's least crowded dive spots, despite the appeal of its fluorescent marine life and surreal coral cliffs. On the high edge of west and north Bali, the mythical stone fountain baths of Air Panas Banjar nod to the island's strong spiritual roots.



Nusa Lembongan and Nusa Penida

When the madness of the mainland gets too much, two offshore options are worth considering.

The appeal of Nusa Lembongan, a 30-minute boat ride across the Badung Strait, lies in the authenticity of island life. While away your days surfing, diving and snorkelling, experimenting with yoga moves on a stand-up paddleboard, or kayaking through mangrove forests. If that's not enough, walk the yellow suspension bridge to Nusa Ceningan where you can dine or sleep at the boat shed-style Le Pirate Beach Club.

The other option is Nusa Penida. Around a 40-minute boat ride from mainland Bali, it's larger than neighbouring Nusa Lembongan and Nusa Ceningan, but has remained relatively undeveloped, with secluded white-sand beaches constituting a large part of its appeal. Other attractions include limestone caves and rugged coastal cliffs, as well as a number of Hindu temples. Birdwatchers will be thrilled to hear that the island is also a sanctuary to the region's endangered birds including the Bali starling.

Agung View offers lumbung-style rooms overlooking the sea and the picturesque village of Toya Pakeh. Another spot with stunning ocean views is Penida Colada in the charming village of Ped. The cafe comes alive in the evenings when ravenous hordes descend to feast on seafood barbecues before indulging in a cocktail or two.

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PUBLISHED APRIL 2015