

NARINA EXELBY AND MARK EVELEIGH



# SECRET BALI

AN UNUSUAL GUIDE



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

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## TAMAN FESTIVAL

①

### *An abandoned amusement park: Bali's spookiest landmark?*

*Jalan Padang Galak no. 3, Kesiman, Denpasar  
Open daily*

At one moment spine-chillingly haunting, the next charmingly evocative of *Jungle Book* romance, this place conjures up many images. This amusement park, abandoned in the 1990s, is fast being re-colonised by rioting vegetation, and as vines and creepers crawl over the carved façades, it is taking on a charm reminiscent of an entire complex of lost jungle temples. The fact that some stunning graffiti portraits leer out from hidden corners, adding a splash of colour and another hint of otherworldliness, makes it all the more enchanting. Squirrels skip across crumbling stonework, lizards rustle in the undergrowth, and bats flit through the shadows of desolate theatres.

The roots of an ancient banyan tree (a witness to times long before the park was even conceived of) crawl poignantly across a sculpted rainforest mural above what was once the Turbo Theatre. Peering through the pillars from the back of the lobby is a wonderful spray-painted graffiti portrait of an Aztec warrior. The cross-cultural combination makes the spot even

more intriguing ... and a cautious exploration of the pitch-black depths of the theatre itself must be one of Bali's spookiest experiences.

It is likely that the 20 or so haunting buildings in Taman Festival now offer a more invigorating visitor experience than they might have done when they were opened in 1997. The park had the world's first inverted rollercoaster, a man-made volcano, a whole extravaganza of 3D experiences and laser shows, Bali's biggest swimming pool, and crocodiles (although not in the same pool).

But Taman Festival was (quite literally) a flash in the pan.

"It was just too expensive," a security guard at the site shrugs. "Admission was Rp75,000 at a time when you could get a local meal for Rp2,000."

Rumours abound as to what actually happened. The most likely story relates to the US\$5 million worth of laser equipment that was designed to make a lightshow of the night sky. Ironically, it was on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> (in March 1998) that freak lightning scored a direct hit on the laser. The insurance money was never forthcoming and doors closed finally in 2000. Almost two decades later it is said that disputes are still ongoing about ownership of the eight-hectare plot, and these days you stand a good chance of having the deserted park to yourself.

The wildest tales concern the crocs that are said to still roam wild around the park. Some say they were fed by locals – and some very unlikely reports even suggest that they fed on locals. Security guards at the sight told us that they were sent to a reptile park near Ubud ... but actually they are now at the Bali Wildlife Rescue Centre in Tabanan (see page 224).



## THE TABOOS OF BUNUT BOLONG ⑥

*Would you dare to drive through the tunnel in a sacred fig tree?*

*Jalan Pekutatan, Manggisari, Pekutatan, Jembrana*



A highlight on the beautiful road that runs north to south across West Bali is Bunut Bolong, a fig tree that has formed a tunnel over the road. Grab a coffee at the tree-side *warung* and watch as a stream of motorbikes, cars and lorries pass through the tree. You may notice that some vehicles take the bypass road around the trunk – this is because there are certain taboos regarding passage through Bunut Bolong.

It is said that anyone “unclean” may not pass through the sacred tree. In Balinese Hinduism, for example, mothers and their babies are considered unclean for 42 days after birth, and even people en route to a ceremony (and therefore yet to be blessed) might be considered unclean. More strictly, bodies of deceased people being taken for cremation should not pass through the tree.

Locals explain that Bunut Bulong should be viewed as a great *candi bentar* (split gate entrance to a temple). A Balinese Hindu would consider it wicked to pass through a *candi bentar* without first elevating their mind to a more spiritual plane. In the same way, many feel uneasy about passing through the tunnel without paying respect to the sacred tree first.

The shrine at Bunut Bulong is permanently laden with offerings, and the fact that the bypass lane has recently been repaved is further evidence that the taboos are still in effect. There is another unusual myth concerning this old fig tree: it is said that courting couples should not pass through the tree before they have been married. To do so would bring a curse upon their relationship.

Beginning at Pekutatan on the southern coastline, the road that passes through Bunut Bulong winds up through plantations of palm, rubber, coffee, cacao and clove trees; just after picking season the air is perfumed with the scent of drying cloves. It leads over a spine of mountains then drops through tunnels of trees to the flatlands of Seririt on the north coast. The most picturesque time to drive this road is just after sunrise when mist rises from the creases of densely forested valleys; incense wafts from shrines, and the sun’s low rays add a luminescence to roadside flowers. Near Pupuan there are excellent views of Batukaru, Bali’s second highest mountain. Later in the day this view fades into haze, but in the early morning, the outlook across paddies and plantations towards the volcanic peak is remarkable.

## MEDEWI'S HAUNTED BEACH

⑩

*Local legend has it that the black sand here has healing power*

*Medewi Beach, Jembrana*



Surfers pass by with eyes only for the peeling waves of Medewi's celebrated point break, while at their backs, soaring coconut palms loom over one of the most mystical spots on the Island of the Gods.

"Some people say that here they've seen a ghostly old woman dressed in white and with hair that reaches to the ground," says local healer Pak Nasri. "Occasionally, on a moonlit night, I've seen a ghost palace silhouetted among the rocks near the river mouth."

Tales of ghost sightings (even occasionally by travellers) abound, but this place is said to be very positively spiritual rather than evil. This little stretch of beach – wedged between a hotel and a river mouth – has always been considered a place of importance by members of both the Hindu and Muslim communities in this part of Bali. Ceremonies are sometimes held here with up to 200 Hindu worshippers driving down the dirt track that leads here through a tiny fishing village.

Occasionally you'll meet people who have travelled from the surrounding villages to cover rheumatic limbs with the black volcanic sand that they believe has healing qualities. If the towering coconut palms (among the tallest on the island) are anything to go by then there may indeed be something inherently powerful about this place.

### *Why you should not whistle while strolling along a beach at night*

The Balinese may well be unique among the world's islanders for their inherent fear of the sea, and even of their beautiful beaches. The coastline was long believed to be the haunt of evil spirits, and even today few traditional Balinese would enjoy a walk on the sand after sunset. If you do find yourself strolling at night along a beach with nervous Balinese friends, don't try to reassure them with hearty whistling; many Balinese still believe that whistling is a way to summon evil spirits.

## FISHING BOATS OF PERANCAK 13

### *The fishing fleet that looks like a floating art gallery*

Air Kuning inlet, Perancak, Negara, Jembrana

Turn south off the main Denpasar-Gilimanuk road at the village of Tegal Cangkring. Follow Jalan Sekar Jagat 2 km towards the beach, then turn right and stick to the Yeh Kuning coast road for about 8 km



Appearing at first glance like a fleet of psychedelic Viking longboats, the boats of Perancak are among the world's most spectacular traditional fishing craft. Each one is about 20 metres long and their great looming bows rise to about 8 metres above the mirror-like waters of the inlet. What makes them look even more like Viking longboats are what seem to be rows of oars held suspended at the ready above the water. But rather than oars powered by barbarian plunderers, these are long-shafted propellers, each driven by a diesel motor (often six per boat) mounted along the gunwales to provide impressive power and manoeuvrability.

There are an estimated 150 vibrantly painted, timber-hulled trawlers along this part of the coastline. If this glittering armada were in east Bali it would be a major tourist sight, but here in west Bali you're unlikely to see another foreign face.

These boats, called *perahu selerek*, carry crews of up to 20. They come from Madura (an island north of Java), but even there you rarely find traditional teak boats of this scale and splendour. There is clearly a huge amount of pride of ownership in these vessels, and maintenance is so rigorous that you rarely see one with chipping, faded paintwork or tattered banners.

The best time to come is early morning to coincide with the off-loading of the boats. Then the sleepy little beach is thronging with chattering people, and the usually deserted lane is bustling with pickup trucks and panier-bearing mopeds ready to make the rush to canning factories and fish markets across Bali.

One of the most noticeable aspects of the Perancak fleet is that the *perahu selerek* are almost always moored in matching pairs. *Selerek* refers to the purse-seine fishing technique. The "male" and "female" boats each play such a vital part in the technique that on the rare occasion a boat is forced to work alone, it is known locally as a *janda* – a widow.

Look closer still and you'll notice that while both boats have the brightly painted bamboo spars known as *belandang* (traditionally used to dry nets, but now purely decorative), the foremast of the slightly smaller "female" boat will be topped with what looks like a vibrantly decorated "throne room". What would pass as a humble crow's nest in other boats is often styled (depending on the owner's tastes or religious sensibilities) to appear either as an Islamic throne, decorated with the guardian image of a Muslim saint, or as what might appear to be a magical toy motorcar. It actually represents the royal chariot that, in Hindu mythology, carried Prince Rama into battle.

## KEBUN RAYA JAGATNATHA

16

*Homage to what might be our planet's youngest god*

*Jalan Sudirman, Dauhwaru, Negara, Jembrana*



Travellers on the main Denpasar-Gilimanuk highway (which connects with the 24-hour ferry service to Java) are often surprised to see an immense temple entrance – featuring a pair of 8-metre-tall stone suns and a row of five larger-than-life dancing girls. It is particularly fitting that the girls are captured in various poses of the Puspajali dance – a relatively modern dance that was created in 1989, and is frequently used to welcome honoured guests.

This is the spectacular entrance to Kebun Raya Jagatnatha, a beautifully peaceful garden around which to wander. Nevertheless, unless it is a ceremonial occasion you are unlikely to see another person here, and these gardens remain one of the ignored gems of what is certainly Bali's most overlooked regency capital. While Kebun Raya Jagatnatha is on the route from Java to Bali, it is invariably bypassed by domestic visitors, and you're very unlikely to see Western tourists anywhere in the city of Negara.

As you step through the great solar portals that lead off the main road, you'll find some unexpected architectural formations that seem very different to those in any other temple on the island. On the far side of an expanse of lawns and gardens, you'll see a pair of great swooping black-stone wings, reminiscent of the Garuda, the mythical beast that was the eagle-like steed of the Hindu god Wisnu and, in modern times, a national symbol of the world's biggest Muslim country.

When you walk through this monumental gateway, you'll see a large amphitheatre leading to the entrance to the inner sanctum of the temple (known as the *jeroan*) and it's here that you'll find one of the biggest shrines to Surya (the sun god) on the whole island. Rising to about 20 metres above the temple's inner patio, it is topped with an empty throne and the image of a god that is unique to Balinese Hinduism. The name Sanghyang Widi Wasa dates back to about the 1930s; it refers to an entity that symbolises one almighty god who can then be divided into the Hindu "holy trinity" of Brahma, Siva and Wisnu. This symbol thus conforms to the Indonesian constitutional principal that official religions must be based on a belief in a single omnipotent deity. This spritely looking little figure is always portrayed with flames shooting from his joints. Notoriously hard to define, his other name, Acintya, is often translated as "the inconceivable" or "he who cannot be imagined".

You'll see an image of Sanghyang Widi Wasa adorning the Surya shrine in most temples, yet as a god, he receives no specific offerings, is not followed by any sect or group, and has no temples dedicated specifically to him. From the solar gateways at the front to the massive "sun-god shrine" at the back, Kebun Raya Jagatnatha, however, is about as close as you will come to a temple dedicated to this enigmatic deity.

## NAGASEPAHA VILLAGE PUPPET MAKERS ⑩

*Where colourful characters from the Hindu epics are brought to life*

Unnamed road in Desa Nagasepaha, Buleleng

Nagasepaha is about 5 km south-east of Singaraja. Ask in the village for the house of the puppet makers, and you will be directed there.

Open daily, except on Balinese holidays

Free entry, but a donation or small purchase is greatly appreciated

In the small village of Nagasepaha, near Singaraja, one family works tirelessly to produce two of Bali's disappearing traditional arts: they make *wayang kulit* (leather shadow puppets) and intricately detailed glass paintings.

"We have been painting glass and *wayang kulit* for a long, long time," says Gede Kenak Eriada, who first learned the art when he was just eight



years old. "It's a tradition that has already disappeared from east and west Bali, and now our home is the only place I know of where *wayang kulit* and glass art are created." Gede's home is a bustle of creativity. Five of his family members create the art, and their home is a studio space as well as a showroom.

*Wayang kulit* is a tradition that has been around for centuries. Translated as "leather puppet", *wayang kulit* refers both to the flat leather puppets that are rear-projected onto a screen, and to the actual performance itself. Typically the *dalang* (puppeteer) tells stories from the Hindu epics, and so the puppets that Gede and his family create are all characters from the epics.

"When we paint on glass we can express ourselves, but when we make *wayang kulit* we cannot have our own style. They must all be made the same," explains Gede. "In Java, the puppets are bigger than ours, and here we use more colours. Different areas have different styles, but we must keep our area's style."

The puppets are made from cowhide that Gede's family buys "fresh". They then stretch it and leave it to dry for five days before the creative work begins. The puppet will be cut (both its physical shape and the holes that give the shadow puppets their details), painted and finally the limbs will be attached to the body. Even though an audience will not see the colours of the puppets during a performance, they are very carefully detailed and painted so that the *dalang* can tell the characters apart.

"To make one *wayang kulit* it will take 15 to 20 days, and the most expensive one we sell costs Rp3,500,000; the cheapest is Rp300,000," says Gede. "It is a lot more difficult to make the puppets than it is to paint on glass. It will take you months to learn the reverse glass painting, but to make the *wayang kulit* you need to learn for years."

Glass painting, a relatively new art form in Bali that is thought to date back to about 1910, has a link to *wayang kulit*; the paintings also tell stories from the Hindu epics. The painting, which will take between seven and 10 days to complete, is done in reverse on the back of the glass.

Most of the glass paintings Gede's family produces are commissions for family homes (where they will be placed in shrines), while the *wayang kulit* will either be used in performances or as decoration. "If you play with the puppets they will break sooner, but they could last decades," says Gede.

In 2003 Unesco designated *wayang kulit* as one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. In his book *A House in Bali*, composer Colin McPhee tells beautiful stories about watching and listening to *wayang kulit* performances that lasted many, many hours – often through the night and into the early hours of the morning.

## BALI BUTTERFLY PARK

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### *Moths and butterflies from around Indonesia*

Jalan Batukaru, Sesandan, Tabanan

Daily 8am–5pm

Entry: Rp85,000 per adult; Rp45,000 per child



As the land starts to rise from Tabanan towards the slopes of Batukaru (a dormant volcano and the second highest peak on Bali), so the air begins to cool. The climate becomes wetter, the vegetation a little more lush – the perfect habitat for butterflies.

It's for this very reason that the Bali Butterfly Park was established in the village of Wanasari. The park was started in 1993 by six lepidopterologists (butterfly enthusiasts) who wanted to create a place that would both conserve butterflies and educate people about these pretty insects. It is now home to about 25 species of butterflies and moths from around Indonesia.

The park is a large, carefully landscaped garden protected by a shade-cloth “tent” and incorporates flowing water and lots of vegetation. “This is real butterfly habitat,” says Luh Putu Sri Wahyuni, who has worked at the park since 2005. “In here are the plants that butterflies love, but there are also their predators, like praying mantis, here.”

Putu spends most of her working days inside a protected space that is the nursery of the park: the place where butterflies and moths emerge from their cocoons and dry their wings. “These creatures don't have a very long lifespan,” she explains. “Some of them live just a few days, while others can live up to three weeks.”

To the untrained eye it can be difficult to tell the difference between a moth and a butterfly, but Putu says there are some surprisingly simple traits to look out for: butterflies tend to hold their wings up while resting, whereas moths will hold them open; if you see a caterpillar and it has tiny hairs on its body, it will become a moth.

The majestic *Attacus Atlas* moth – called a *borong* in Indonesian – is the star of the show in this little nursery. They are the largest species in the park (Putu recalls one specimen that had a wingspan of 30 cm), and yet they live for only five days. Take a careful look at its wings and you'll see how its colouring acts as protection from predators by mimicking the appearance of a snake.

The best time to be here is before 10am and after 3pm, as the butterflies are most active outside of the hottest hours of the day. But no matter what time you're there you're likely to be delighted by the hundreds of butterflies that flit through the garden.

In one pavilion there are some enormous stick insects, as well as scorpions and rhinoceros beetles. Not much information is available on these insects, but it's a good photo opportunity if you don't mind the insects climbing on you.

## BALI WILDLIFE RESCUE CENTRE 27

*A chance to see (and help) Indonesia's unique wildlife*

Jalan Teratai no. 49, Dauh Peken, Tabanan  
0361 894 1677  
fnpf.org  
Daily 9am–4pm



**B**ali Wildlife Rescue Centre has facilities to offer shelter to almost 100 birds and animals, and you are likely to see as many as 30 different species here at any one time. This is an animal hospital and rehabilitation centre where a mind-boggling variety of creatures can be prepared for release back into the wild.

The centre has five full-time staff members (including experienced veterinarians) and counts on the support of volunteers, who arrange their visits through local hotels in Tabanan or via Airbnb Experiences. You will see the critically endangered Bali starling and the protected black-winged starling, as well as kites, parrots, hornbills, eagles and various birds-of-paradise that are waiting for return to their natural habitat. Many of these creatures have been confiscated from smugglers and collectors, or from the Satria Bird Market (see page 32) in Denpasar. They are quarantined on arrival then caged in conditions that are as natural as possible to try to prepare them for the wild.

Some of these creatures are so injured or traumatised (or have been captive for so long) that they can never be released – the centre can only attempt to give them a comfortable home for the rest of their lives. There is a sun bear that will be returned to Sumatra when funds and papers are accumulated (it had been waiting for 18 months when we visited), and a pair of binturong “bear cats”, which you will learn are neither bears nor cats but actually oversized palm civets. Even more “over-sized” are the giant crocodiles; it turns out that these are the mysterious “man-eating escapees” from the crocodile ponds at the abandoned Taman Festival theme park (see page 12).

The centre receives funding in the form of donations from (occasional) visitors and volunteers, and is supported by Friends of the National Parks Foundation. The costs of trans-location and the bureaucracy involved in transporting protected species to their natural habitats in Kalimantan, Sumatra or West Papua means that some inmates stay at Bali Wildlife Rescue Centre much longer than anticipated. Some of the creatures you are likely to see are crowned pigeons, yellow-crested cockatoos, variegated hornbills, civets (often rescued from confinement in atrocious *kopi luwak* establishments), green tree pythons, southern pig-tailed macaques and ebony leaf monkeys. Known locally simply as *monyet hitam* (black monkeys), these gibbon-like primates are often sought after for ceremonial sacrifices.

## SANGEH MONKEY FOREST

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### Bali's "other" monkey forest

Obyek Wisata Sangeh, Jalan Brahmama, Sangeh, Badung  
 bukit-sari-sangeh.com  
 Daily 7:30am–6pm



The village of Sangeh boasts a 14-hectare forest of 2,000 towering nutmeg trees – home now to troupes of curious macaque monkeys – that were planted in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to form part of the royal garden of the Mengwi kingdom. It's cool and often breezy in the forest, offering welcome respite from Bali's tropical heat, yet relatively few outsiders seem to know about it.

Between the trees, which stand almost 45 metres straight up, a network of paths links four temples. Pura Bukit Sari is the main temple here; it has a nine-level meru tower dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu. While it is still a very sacred place, the ornate gateway now forms the backdrop for many pre-wedding photography sessions. If you come across one of these shoots you're in luck; you will have the chance to see the spectacular traditional wedding attire.

There are hundreds of macaque monkeys living in three troupes within the sacred forest at Sangeh. They're less intimidating than their cousins up the road in Ubud but it's still best not to get too close. What's curious here is this: sometimes a monkey from this forest will "adopt" a kitten from the village and literally love it to death. It's not unusual, the temple guards say, to see a monkey holding onto a tiny kitten, grooming it and clenching it to their body as the monkey leaps from tree to tree. Eventually the kittens die, however, because the monkeys can't give them the nutrition they need to survive.

The Ubud Monkey Forest is said to be the most popular tourist spot on the island – thousands of visitors enter this sacred place every month, wandering the shaded pathways that are the domain of the rather brazen monkeys. With moss-covered carvings and plants that grow over walls and bridges, it certainly can be an evocative place if you're there when it's quiet ... but Sangeh Monkey Forest, just a 10-minute drive away, is even more intriguing and far removed from the Ubud crowds.

#### Did you know ...

The nutmeg trees (*Dipterocarpus trinervis*) that grow at Sangeh are not of the same species that is native to the Maluku Islands in north-eastern Indonesia, which produce edible nutmeg seeds. That species (*Myristica fragrans*) was highly sought after during the spice trade days, and it was because of the nutmeg, mace and cloves found on these islands that they became known as the Spice Islands.

NARINA EXELBY AND MARK EVELEIGH



**SECRET**

**BALI**

**AN UNUSUAL GUIDE**

Black sand that has healing power, why you should not whistle while strolling down a beach at night, Bali's most beautiful and least-visited rice terraces, a very special gift to take home from Bali, a workshop where Batiks are created with unique natural dyes, a place to petition the spirits for a baby, the flute-playing pigeons of Ubud, an enchanting village of traditionally styled bamboo roofs, a haunting reunion of some of Bali's most outrageous demons, one of the world's best unofficial streetart exhibitions, a tree it is impossible to plant, an ancient fertility statue with "more than the usual quota of penises", a mysterious breed of cattle, a village of the deaf, a miniature version of Java's Unesco-listed Borobudur, fantastic tranced bull races, the world's most spectacular traditional fishing craft, an architectural wonder of Bali's Christian heartland, Bali's only colonial-era rubber plantation ...

Bali offers countless opportunities to step off the beaten path and is home to any number of well-hidden treasures that are revealed only to residents and travelers who are ready to explore.

*Secret Bali - An unusual guide* is an indispensable resource for those who think they already know Bali or would like to discover its hidden places, taking you far from the crowds and the usual clichés.

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