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The emerald isle



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NATURE IN MANY HUES The waters off Gili Trawangan. Photos: Deepa Alexander.



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Gili Trawangan (Indonesia) Is a heady concoction of reggae, rum and reefs

I swill a little of the Indian Ocean in my mouth and watch in sheer awe as a procession of clownfish, coloured fairy basslets and bearded scorpionfish blitz by my head. And then, a lone Hawksbill turtle floats past lazily, a weak shaft of sunlight dancing on its amber-streaked back, as it weaves its way through a coral reef. I scamper backwards and pull myself onboard the *Norma Jean*, a glass-bottomed boat bobbing about the Straits of Lombok. An eagle sails between me and the balmy afternoon sun. In the distance, the starburst tops of palm trees outline Lombok's shores.

Here I am, eight degrees south of the Equator, snorkeling off the coast of Gili Trawangan in Indonesia. But all this is much after I chased a rosy-fingered dawn into Kuala Lumpur and followed the mid-day sun into Denpasar at the invitation of the Indonesian Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Bali's famed Kuta beach and its sea of surfers were waiting to be discovered, but we boarded the flight to Mataram, the capital of Lombok instead. Unlike mostly Hindu Bali, Lombok is Muslim — an island of fez hats, mosques and farmers. In Lombok, the customs of the Muslim Sasaks — the ethnic group that makes up most of the population — are influenced by a dash of Hinduism and animism.

Markets at Mataram

Lombok still retains a virginal charm and an appealing frumpiness. Tiled houses awash with purple bougainvillea jostle for space with terraced paddy fields and banana groves. I race past Mataram's main market, full of rainbow-hued birds that sing from bamboo confinement, past

sacks of pepper that give Lombok its name (Lombok means chilli in Javanese), and an array of lovely baskets made from palm fronds. The bus squeezes past the crush of cidomos, small horse-drawn carriages, to climb a winding mountain road dotted with bearded monkeys. And, at what seems another bend in the road is a view of the ocean with the three coral atolls — Gili Trawangan, Gili Meno and Gili Air.

Bobbing off the coast of jungly Lombok, east of touristy Bali, with one pedicured toe in the Indian Ocean, lies Gili Trawangan. I exchange the black volcanic sand of Lombok for a fast boat ride to the limestone-washed beaches of Trawangan and wade ashore to the beautiful Hotel Villa Ombak. The Sidewalk Café opens to a richly-carved lounge overlooking the cerulean waters. Stone turtles lead me to my wooden villa, with an open shower shrouded behind curtains of flowering frangipani and oleander.

Trawangan offers visitors an aural buffet — the muezzin's call to prayer blends with the clink of beer glasses, the cooing of pigeons and the busy chirp of sparrows. The only way to get around is to walk, hire a cidomo or cycle. I head off in a cidomo to watch the sun skinny-dip into the ocean. Crowds of sun-burnt tourists with impressive beer bellies and locals sporting dreadlocks watch the sky come awash in ochre. As always in the east, in no time dusk cloaks the coast.

Some of the revellers mount cycles and head back on the sandy tracks that play peek-a-boo with the ocean. It's so quiet you can hear the relentless scurry of lizards in the dry underbrush.

Trawangan is a party island, full of honeymooners and backpackers, dancing all night to reggae, rum and the waves crashing on the reefs. At dinner, I tuck into *nasi goreng* and gingerly pick at the mantis prawns that resemble creatures from a horror flick, but the flavour is worth the fright. The play of light on the old-fashioned wooden schooner just off the coast and the seaside lounge are alluring but I give up on Bob Marley and indulge in a Balinese massage to soothe my nerves that seemed to have travelled faster and further than H.G. Wells' time machine. At the fragrant, well-appointed spa, my tired muscles perk up to the soft tones of the gamelan, an ensemble of percussion, gongs, flutes and xylophone.

Find your spirit

I walk through Trawangan's only main road, an unpaved pony lane. All along the beach, tables for two are laid out, covered in crisp linen and lit by small hurricane lamps. I stop by a store selling wooden masks with primitive designs, inlaid with shell highlights and intricate painted motifs. Choosing a mask, according to island lore, is like choosing your guardian spirit. A dark russet one calls out to me. From the deck chair outside the villa I watch the southern skies pinned with stars with the belt of Orion clinging on to the northern rim of the sky. In the distance, like a giant shadow with its perfect cone, looms the volcanic Mt. Agung, the highest point in Bali.

The next morning, I leave Trawangan still asleep from yesterday's party, for Mataram and the flight back to Denpasar. As the Fokker 50 tilts towards Bali, Trawangan's spirits still weave their spell.

I stay enchanted.

FACTFILE

- * The Gili islands are great places for snorkeling and scuba diving (it is also a teaching centre). Jellyfish abound, so wearing a wet suit is advisable.
- * Accommodation is aplenty, ranging from backpacker beach huts, dormitories, home-stays and villas to high-end resorts.
- * Garuda Indonesia and Merpati airlines operate daily flights between Denpasar and Mataram. There are also numerous boat services from Bali to the Gili islands.
- * The best time to visit is May through August.