

July 26, 2010

## Bali - A place in time



Balinese dancers



The Hindu

A sculpture on a traffic island. Photo: Deepa Alexander



The Hindu

Tanah Lot. Photo: Deepa Alexander

## **Where terraced fields swoop down on sandy beaches, and almond-eyed dancers enthrall in ancient temples**

The lingering fragrance of frangipani...I wake up to it. The garland that greeted my arrival at Bali now adorns a deep rattan chair. My room at the plush Hotel Aston Kuta overlooks the Indian Ocean and the island's green landscape with its overwhelming Hindu aura and perpetual holiday vibe.

I head to the sea, and dig my feet into the warm sand to watch surfers ride the waves. Sarongs paint Kuta beach in all colours, and clouds skirt the edges of the water. Kuta, just around the bend from Ngurah Rai airport, is packed with pubs, posh restaurants, malls, hotels and money-changers. This is a part of Bali that resembles a music video.

In the distance lie the dun houses of Denpasar — meaning north of the bazaar — the capital of Bali. The open market nestled among palm fronds is crowded with women selling handicrafts and raw food. A batik hand-fan catches my fancy but I have to wait for the goddess of wealth to be appeased with a bamboo basket filled with rice and flowers before sales begin. Life in Bali is an endless litany of praise to the gods. From womb to tomb ceremonies abound, and the island's version of Hinduism leaves its stamp on art and architecture, music and dance. Even the Dutch who landed here in 1906 trundling their guns behind them could not rip this fabric of Balinese society.

### **Temple hopping**

Discovering Bali's Hindu link elbows its way onto my list, and I head for the temples of Goa Gajah, Tampak Siring, Tanah Lot and the cultural town of Ubud. My guide Bagus is a fount of knowledge, and between his breathless sermons on Bali culture, I manage a peek at scenes from everyday life.

Sculptures depicting battles from Hindu mythology loom over traffic circles. The road to Goa Gajah slices past silky beaches and lined cliffs. Lush jungles and black volcanic peaks race by

the bus window to give way to terraced paddy fields, framing the countryside like massive amphitheatres. An ageless vista of people in bamboo hats working in fields silhouetted against dark clouds mustering for their afternoon onslaught on the hills. Ducks striding single-file on banks, goats pirouetting like ballerinas and hens scrabbling in the dust. This pastoral scene is interspersed with houses built in compounds with buildings arranged according to tradition — the family temple, the kitchen and the elder's room, all have their place.

The first stop is Goa Gajah (Elephant Cave), and even before I climb down to the labyrinthine cave with its relief of menacing creatures and demons, I snap up an exquisitely-carved Garuda from a shop around the temple. The cave houses a 9th Century temple to Ganesha and opens out to an extensive bathing area.

I journey on to Tampak Siring with its presidential palace overlooking the Tirta Empul temple. Gargoyles spout water at the faithful who take a dip to ward off evil dreams. Legend has it that Indra struck his thunderbolt and underground streams sprung from the earth.

The temple has row upon row of gilt-edged pavilions, thrones and anterooms guarded by figurines wrapped in checkered sarongs. Orchids cling tight to mossy walls as people flutter about praying and wafting incense at every nook.

It's almost sunset when I arrive at Ubud, an artists' centre. The town's beauty lies in its untouched layout — birds fill the evening skies and cicadas tune for a starlight serenade even as I down a mug of coffee at a WiFi-enabled restaurant nestled among fields on Monkey Forest Road. The road that ends in a wooded reserve teeming with wild macaques is lined with high-end shops selling classy paraphernalia.

Warungs (family-owned restaurants) serving traditional dishes such as roast pig and satay abound, but I refuse to play Russian roulette with my stomach and choose a water spinach and shrimp salad.

At night the traditional legong beckons. The dance performed by lithe performers sheathed in silks with enormous floral headdresses to the hypnotic strains of a gamelan orchestra bears a strong resemblance to Indian dance forms. Brass gongs strike up, and a bevy of girls appears on stage in a cascade of graceful gestures and darting almond-shaped eyes. The moon is at its zenith when the prince wins his princess, and the gongs become echoes in the night as I head back to Kuta.

The next morning, I visit Tanah Lot temple, an icon of Bali, and a marvel at sunset. Built by a 15th Century priest, Nirartha, the temple is built on an off-shore rock and can be visited during low tide. I watch crowds of tourists wind their way down to the entrance, but it's nearly mid-morning, and waves lap against the rocky pathway leading to it.

Strolling along Kuta beach that evening as whisker-thin sunbeams scorch the aquamarine waters, I hum a Rodgers and Hammerstein show tune from the 1949 classic 'South Pacific': *Bali Ha'i may call you, Any night, any day, In your heart, you'll hear it call you: 'Come away...Come away.'*

I realise then that in Bali, paradise is only as close as the nearest palm-fringed beach or the temple around the corner. That the island's magic lies in the dissonance of the gamelan, the arched mudras of its dancers. In shared legends. And, in the lingering fragrance of frangipani.