

# Condé Nast Traveller

THE WORLD MADE LOCAL

NOVEMBER 2022

## THE READERS' CHOICE AWARDS 2022

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### PLUS

AN ON-THE-GROUND REPORT FROM  
ZAMBIA'S THRILLING SAFARI SCENE  
HOW BARCELONA HAS BOUNCED BACK  
WE CHECK INTO BANGKOK'S  
COOLEST NEW HANGOUT  
THE AUTUMN DESTINATIONS  
TO KNOW ABOUT

Clockwise from this picture: dusk in Lean village; coral and polished glass from a local beach; interior at Villa Hana; snacks in Buahan village; valley in east Bali; bedroom at Buahan, A Banyan Tree Escape; market in Taro; worshipper in Les; flowers at Nirjhara hotel; Aude Geraud, co-owner of Villa Hana. Opposite, pool at Villa Hana



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from Bali's built up hotspots are villages  
I move to a slower, more reflective rhythm

Words and photographs by Chris Schalkx

# A

QUIET, TWO-STREET HAMLET ON Bali's eastern tip, Lean is part of a string of coastal villages known as Amed, which hugs a black-sand bay crunchy with shells and coral nubbins. Pebbles of coloured glass dot the bay where a handful of hotels and warungs hides in the jungle fringe, polished into forbidden wine gums by the Bali Sea. But most real estate here is still fishermen's homes made from bamboo and cinder blocks. I am staying in the hilltop retreat owned by Widaning Sri, Wida for short. Wida was born on Surabaya, one island west, and has been coming to this part of Bali all her life. Fifteen years ago, she bought a plot of land up the hill, far from the crowds in Kuta and Legian, and has since spent summers with her French-Indonesian daughter Aude, snorkelling in Lean's glassy waters and drinking lemonade with kele-kele honey at the local restaurants that teeter on the rocky cliffs. Last summer, they opened Villa Hana, a bookable hideaway above Wida's home – with roofs made from thatched lalang grass and two whitewashed bedrooms furnished with antiques they picked up on the island.

With a generous spirit, she ushers me around, showing me the many rituals of the village. One evening we pass a gathering of women, a flash of floral sarong and eye-popping cummerbunds dancing to the hypnotising pling-plong of the gamelan, a percussive orchestra of xylophones and gangsa. Another evening, we find Putra, a local fisherman, tidying yards of nylon netting in his jukung outrigger, one of the hundred or so lining the beach. He tells us about the tour guides and bellboys that returned to their hometown during the pandemic, and now sail out to the fish-rich waters off Lombok every morning. He's Wida's go-to for the mackerel she turns into pepes ikan, spice-smothered parcels steamed in banana leaves. When she asks him when he'll be back with his catch, he shrugs. "I don't know, the fish can't read time."

Sabar, or patience, dictates life's rhythm in this part of the world. "Whenever I arrive here, I instantly lose track of time," says Wida, over meals of sate and sambal. "There's still this genuine connection to the island that has been lost in other parts of Bali." This is the Bali I've come to



Clockwise  
street near  
Buahan; fa  
marigold  
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Escape;  
jar at Los

from this picture: Lean beach;  
near Mount Agung; grilled fish at  
a farming family in Buahan village;  
fish at a market in Taro; carved  
wood at Buahan, A Banyan Tree  
interior of Villa Hana; stone  
at Lindenberg hotel; worshipper  
at a Buahan temple





I share the road with saronged women riding side-saddle, balancing baskets overflowing with fruits and pompoms of marigold on their heads

find – slower and more rooted, away from the scooter-crush of Canggu and the Divine Love workshops of Ubud.

From Wida's, I drive further north, watching the billboard jungle of adverts for surf shops and infinity-pooled villas thin out behind me. I share the road with saronged women riding side-saddle on clattering Yamahas, balancing woven baskets overflowing with fruits and pompoms of marigold on their heads. Turmeric-hued temples are busy with worshippers, here to send off ancestral spirits after they've spent time among the living for Galungan, a 10-day ceremony that turns the island into a floral extravaganza every 210 days. Outside the temple gates, raucous children crowd around pushcarts selling bootleg Disney balloons and terrified baby chicks dyed purple and green.

**R**ICE FIELDS STAND NO CHANCE around the rocky volcanic flatlands sloping off Mount Batur on Bali's northern coast. Instead, farmers grow sweet potatoes and cassava when there's enough rain, and take up fishing during the harsh dry season. "We cook in a different dialect here," local chef and priest Jero Mangku Dalem Suci Gede Yudiawan – Yudi for short – tells me. "We share many recipes with the rest of the island, but swap meat for seafood and use different spices."

I meet him tending to a makeshift grill fired by coconut husks in the palm-fringed courtyard of Dapur Bali Mula, his parental-home-turned-restaurant down a dirt road in the small coastal community of Les. His spotless white sarong seems to be lit up between the collection of daggers, wood carvings, bamboo baskets and rusty oil lanterns lining the open kitchen embalmed in greasy soot and grime. Yudi is still in his holy attire because he's just officiated a blessing ceremony for two of his guests. Now, he has swapped his udeng (a white cloth intricately tied around the head) for a bucket hat, and his white button-up for a Ralph Lauren T-shirt. Before the pandemic, Yudi ran a popular barbecue restaurant on Kuta's Sunset Road, but moved back to his home village when the crowds lulled. It seemed right, he said, just like that hazy instinct years ago, when he felt a calling to return home after running three restaurants in Java. Days later, his family phoned to tell him that the Les community had chosen him to become their next holy man.

Between ceremonies, he cooks. Assisted by a crew of beach boys with inked arms and stretched-out earlobes, he covers my table with plates of mackerel steamed in bamboo tubes and bowls of spicy-sour broth cooked from their bones. There's chili-tossed squid and flat skewers of sate lilit, a spiced paste of mackerel and barracuda served with little bowls of shallots and chilli for dipping. Everything is made from scratch in his kitchen from ingredients sourced around the village: the ocean salt ("Works wonders on an upset stomach"), the lontar palm syrup, the coconut cooking oil and the arak palm wine that dribbles from bamboo pipes into old whiskey bottles. He cooks in clay pots on wood-fired stoves, and grinds herbs in a mortar of volcanic stone, like



*Clockwise from this picture:* front door in Taro; foliage in Buahan village; chef and priest Jero Mangku Dalem Suci Gede Yudiawan; villa at Buahan; A Banyan Tree Escape; traditional snacks in Taro; passion-fruit flower in Buahan village. Opposite, pool at Buahan



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spanning tenures at some of Bali's high-end hotels. During the pandemic, he moved back here, his birthplace, to helm the kitchen at Banyan Tree's rootsy new "no walls, no doors" Escape hotel in a valley on the edge of town.

We follow the burbling of the subak, the UNESCO-protected irrigation system that has watered much of the island's crops for centuries. It weaves past branches strung with leathery green vanilla pods, coffee plants and trees heavy with tangerines. It feeds fields of just-harvested rice, which now reflect Mount Agung veiled in fog. But even between these farmer-sown roots, Buahan keeps giving. Eka points out wild-wood sorrels and mouth-puckering sour berries he'd eat as a kid when hunting for birds in the jungle. I try paracress with edible buds that numb my tongue like Sichuan peppercorns. His face beams when he spots a jellyfish-like blob on a rotting coconut trunk, a hard-to-find local mushroom, which he grills on the spot with a lighter. It tastes meaty, with a coconutty chaser, and he'll later turn it into plant-based satay. "That's the beauty of Buahan," he says. "You pluck it, cook it, and you've got a meal."

Further inland, Wayan brings me to his home village, Taro, where he has turned his parents' sugar-palm plantation into a pit stop for cycling tours. It's part of the desa wisata, or community-based tourism, that he's helping to get off the ground to draw travellers to this part of the island in a sustainable way. We find his father in the shade of towering palms with wooden rungs nailed to their trunks, scraping meat from a coconut shell – the first step in the laborious process of making coconut oil. "He's mostly deaf and needs a stick to walk," Wayan says. "But he still climbs trees like a monkey."

Wayan's ambitions reach far beyond this palm-tufted plot. Just outside town, he tends to rice fields and organic gardens, which light up with swarms of fireflies at night. Elsewhere in Bali, they've mostly disappeared, he tells me, but they're slowly returning to places where the air is clean, the soil is

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ers have done for centuries. It's his attempt at northern Bali's indigenous flavours, too often lost to convenience of instant noodles and pre-packaged blends. When I finish eating, my eyes prickly and my head lolling from the arak shots Yudi gave me to try, I am asked, like all guests, to leave a donation in lieu of paying a bill.

THE NEXT MORNING, I ramble through the rice fields and banana groves of Buahan, a rural community north of Ubud. Sitting shotgun is Wayan Wardika, my guide in a VW convertible so vintage that we needed a spare tire to get going. At a farm down a dirt road, we meet Sunarya, an infectiously upbeat chef with a CV

organic and the water isn't yet contaminated with chemicals. Now, he tries to convince his community to do the same. "The pesticides we use hurt our Ibu Pertiwi, our Mother Earth, so how can we expect nourishing food from her?"

"In a way, the pandemic has been a blessing for us," he concludes, while we share a banana-leaf plate of laklak, tiny rice-flour pancakes drizzled with frothy palm syrup. "We had forgotten about Ibu Pertiwi, but Covid gave us time to stop and reflect. It taught us to take care of this island, to share the values we have." When I return to my wall-less villa at Buahan that evening, I gaze out over the valley; an ombre layer cake, cragily contoured by palms and acacias. And there, in the inky distance, I see the faint blinking of fireflies; just the two of them, dancing rosily into the night. 🦋



Clockwise from this picture: lounge at Lost Lindenberg; turmeric drink at Nirjhara hotel; valley, and temple in Sidemen; beach, ceramics, and wooden walkway, all at Lost Lindenberg; Pekutatan beach; offerings at Taro market. Opposite, balcony at Lost Lindenberg





Clockwise from this picture: flowers in Tabanan; view from Buahan, A Banyan Tree Escape; entrance to Lost Lindenberg; offerings at Tabanan market; staircase at Wapa di Ume Sidemen; bar at Lost Lindenberg; interior of Dapur Bali Mula restaurant; guide Wayan Wardika. Opposite, from left: café in Lean; gado gado salad at Wapa di Ume Sidemen





## WHERE TO GO OFF GRID

### SIDEMEN

It's easy to see why locals refer to Sidemen, a valley town in the shadow of Mount Agung, as the Ubud of 20 years ago. It's similarly fringed by lush jungle, and carpeted in rice paddies and fields of taro and peanuts hemmed by subak canals. Two-tabled warungs serve up roast duck and sell cheap Bintang beers, while farming families still use the streets to dry their rice on tarpaulins. But between the Indo-pop leaking from speakers and the rustle of palms, you can hear the faint noise of saws and hammers – a reminder that this laid-back enclave is on the cusp of a flurry of development. **STAY** Pitched along a river that's home to buffalo-sized boulders, **Wapa di Ume Sidemen** is a bamboo fantasy of swirling pools and thatched-roof villas. Some of the latter open to private plunge pools, while all have breezy interiors of sun-bleached wood and sandy stucco. Despite all the do-nothing appeal here, the cooking class along the river is worth leaving your lounge for. *Doubles from about £180; wapadiumesidemen.com*

### BUAHAN

This rural community lies just 30 minutes north of Ubud's restaurant jumble, but feels like a wholly different part of the island. Farmers rise early and go quiet at dusk, and finely wrought temples of mossy rock dominate the skyline. The Banyan Tree group opened its first Escape outpost here in the summer, but not before spending months researching the best ways to preserve the untouched environment and uplift the local community.

**STAY** The 16 open-sided villas of **Buahan, A Banyan Tree Escape**, crafted like traditional balé pavilions from reclaimed ironwood, roll down a jungled valley dissected by waterfalls and terraced rice fields. The concept is rootsy – from the riverside spa drawing on homegrown herbs and local healing techniques to the Balinese coffee in pour-over kits in the guest rooms. At the restaurant, all ingredients are sourced from within an hour's drive. *Doubles from about £590; escape.banyantree.com*

### TABANAN

Bali's bread basket, a patchwork of pancake-flat fields of rice and corn, has so far escaped the relentless urbanisation of Canggu and Pererenan, 30 minutes to the east. While crowds of tourists stop by the imposing Tanah Lot temple on a rocky island off the coast, most don't venture beyond – leaving this palm-studded hinterland delightfully quiet. In the late afternoon, local families crowd the volcanic beaches and sip fresh coconuts on the beanbags lining the grassy cliffs.

**STAY** Family-owned **Nirjhara**, flanked by an impressive multi-streamed waterfall, is a hush-hush hideaway for Bali's in-crowd. The sleek, straight-lined villas are made from local stone and reclaimed hardwood, and dotted with contemporary Indonesian art. The breezy Ambu restaurant, overlooking the pool and the bamboo-roofed yoga sala by the river, is a welcome resting spot after a guided cycling tour around the countryside. *Doubles from about £190; nirjhara.com*

### MEDEWI

Even further west, this seemingly endless stretch of black sand draws intrepid surfers with Bali's longest left-hand wave breaking on its coast. A few surf camps and family resorts line the beach, but you're still more likely to bump into locals trawling the sand for crabs than other travellers. Plans for a toll road from Denpasar are underway, which will cut a drive of about four hours down to 30 minutes, and undoubtedly bring in a wave of change.

**STAY** Opened in July in sleepy Pekutatan, **Lost Lindenberg** is the first Indonesian outpost from the Frankfurt-based Lindenberg hotel group – and flips the script on typical Balinese boutique escapes. There's no Instagram-ready infinity pool; no wickerwork lights or yoga dogma. Instead, there are lofty rooms in treehouse-like towers, and an anything-goes vibe of salty-haired surfers and their families mingling over communal, plant-based meals at the restaurant's sole dining table. *Doubles from about £600; thelindenberg.com*

## GETTING AROUND

Luxury tour operator **Remote Lands** arranges bespoke itineraries in Bali from £850 per person per day. *remotelands.com*

