

THE YAK

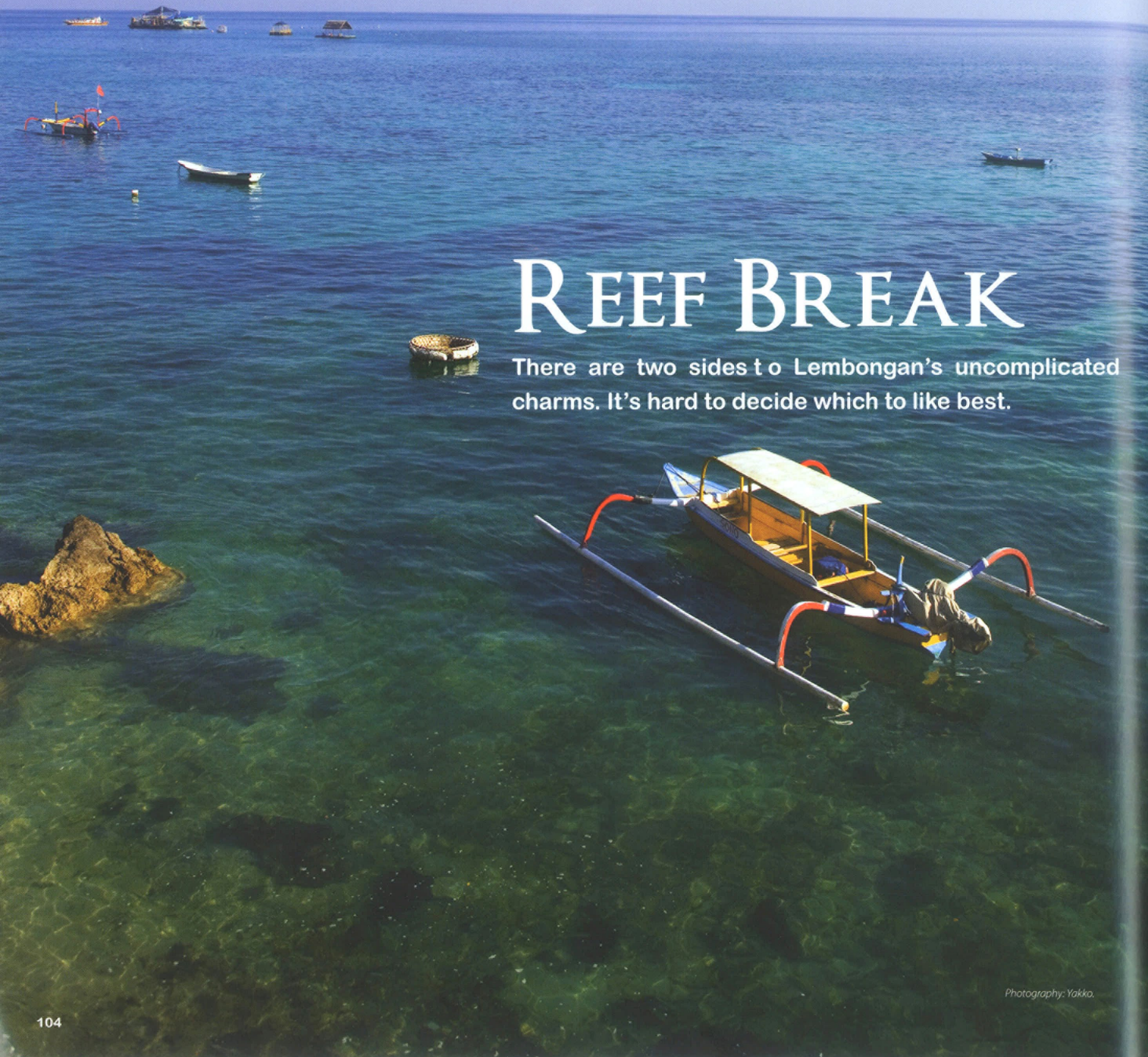
The lighter and darker sides of Bali,
Asia's fashionable playground.

Vol. 16 SEP/OCT/NOV 07

- **New Edge Bali**
- **Fresh Fish By Fedex**
- **Coffee, Tea or Me?**
- **Jogja On My Mind**
- **Vanity Fair Fix**



IDR Rp 48.000 S\$9



REEF BREAK

There are two sides to Lembongan's uncomplicated charms. It's hard to decide which to like best.

Photography: Yakko.



THE last time I went to Nusa Lembongan it was on a converted fishing trawler the size of a small African nation and the journey took more than three hours. About 10 minutes in I remember feeling as if the deck wasn't as firm as it should have been (and that my stomach might be forced to compensate) but as it turned out I was saved by the one concession to modernity this tug had to offer: there was a draft Bintang tap installed on the poop deck. My logic being what it was during those forlorn and hazy years, I remember deciding my best option was to smoke as much of the captain's pot as I could and drink solidly from port to port, thus ensuring I would arrive in better shape. I did not.

Much in Lembongan (and in my own life) has changed since those early years, and thankfully the to-ing and fro-ing from the island has also taken something of a quantum leap. We hopped aboard the Scoot vessel from the beach in Sanur and were there within 30 minutes. Remarkable. The sea at one point over was still the same uncertain cauldron

— there's a stretch three quarters into the voyage when the waters start to resemble a Denpasar junction — but at least it was fast enough not to have to worry about The Sickness.

Land sighted after a voyage, no matter how short, is always welcome of course, and the appearance of rocky cliffs edging down to aquamarine ocean never fails to hearten the holiday spirit. Bali might be a beach paradise to anyone who lives in northern climes, but, let's be frank, its mainline beaches, for the most part, are hardly anything to write home about (although thousands of people do each year). Culture and cocktails are where Bali wins out, but when it comes to accessible beaches, turquoise seas and frothy white surf, Lembongan takes the ribbon. Which is why it's such a pleasure to get away to this beach paradise — the island feels like the kind of place where you can have a holiday, especially when Bali begins to jade.

The transport is not the only alteration to Lembongan's island infrastructure. Luxury has well and truly arrived on its



shores. Batu Karang — literally "coral stone" — is a five-star hotel masquerading as a boutique retreat. It's green too, in more ways than one. Beautifully designed in wood and stone, it feels like old money: great pool, a killer view of the coastline and Mount Agung; well-trained staff, 10 class rooms complete with stunning bathrooms and balconies and more on the way — a three-bedroom villa, wedding suite and day spa are soon to come. Easily the best hotel on this side of the island, and the perfect vantage point from which to watch the local life unfold in all its manifestations.

And what a manifest it is. In the last 20 years, Lembongan has managed to develop a healthy seaweed farming culture the like of which The Body Shop would be proud. An Asian table delicacy and a cornerstone of the world's spa products, seaweed has taken Lembongan to new and unexpected heights. When the turquoise waters retreat, the island's landscape is transformed into a patchwork, emerald valley; where once there were multi-coloured



All Lembongan images by Yakko.

boats bobbing around on calm blue waters, now there is a carpet of green squares bounded by fencing and looking for all the world like Bali *sawah*. These fields soon become alive in the twilight with farmers tending to their crops. Kids play with kites and crabs on the seabed as if running on the *padang* and sturdy young men (and not a few old women) bounce coolie fashion up the hillside with baskets of seaweed lashed between poles and balanced on brown shoulders. This carries on long into the night as everyone makes the most of it; and then in the morning the tide returns and the island is once again returned to its role as tourist holiday hotspot. It's like the two sides of a burnished and beautifully oxidised coin.

Should you require a better view of this remarkable transformation you could always stay at one of the other villa complexes along this stretch of land: we tramped down to the Lembongan Island Beach Villas, not in the same

class or price range as Batu Karang, but functional and friendly in other ways. These self catering villa-cum-chalets are stacked on each other all the way up the hill. It's quite a trek to the top, but worth it once you step onto your balcony. Hard to believe you're staring at Bali from up here, but there it is, as ever on a clear day, the mighty Mountain. Under the volcano we live.

The food on this part of Lembongan is not much to talk about (I have no idea if it's the same story elsewhere). One wonders if the seaweed farming has kept the locals closer to shore. Indeed it was strange to find absolutely no fresh fish bbq available – usually ubiquitous in an Asian beach holiday locale (there was plenty of Marley, however). But what Lembongan lacks in seafood it makes up for in sea-faring: there's two excellent surf breaks to choose from, one, Playgrounds, for beginners, the other, Lacerations, for the pros. There's snorkeling and scuba diving (courtesy of Bali

Hai Diving Adventures), swimming and jet biking; this is the land of Bali Hai Cruises, too, and their stealth-like boat heads this way once a day to moor against its pontoon out in the bay, filling the water with joy-riding banana boat people and a Bond-esque semi sub that slips through the waters like a great white shark. All in all it's a pretty perfect scene for an afternoon on holiday. The sun beats down to brown your body during the day, the surf cools it off, a cocktail takes the edge away and as the day wanes and memories begin to form, the sun sets once again against the horizon, revealing in its wake chalky shores and the happy cries of children as they chase down the beach between the coral. There's a lot to love about a layover in Lembongan. ♣ T.S.

Batu Karang Resort & Day Spa, www.batukaranglembongan.com
Bali Hai Cruises, www.balihaicruises.com
Bali Hai Diving Adventures, www.scubali.com