

Indonesia »

Far from Bali’s mainland hustle Anna King Shahab finds an unspoilt archipelago

Our luggage has been stickered and stacked on a sandy-footed platform by the efficient ground staff of Rocky Fast Cruises at Sanur, the beach that drew the first package tourists to Bali half a century ago. The hotel, which was the island’s first high-rise, still stands, right on the beach here, looking shabby but defiant. But we’re embarking for a place that, while long popular with break-watching surfers, has only recently begun to make a mark on the general tourist trail.

Nusa Lembongan sits just southeast of Bali, around 45 minutes by “fast” ferry from Sanur, but feels deliciously far removed from the mainland hustle. Although tourism has swiftly overtaken the former main earner here — seaweed farming to supply the cosmetics industry — the island retains a chilled out, friendly vibe. It’s also noticeably cleaner (on land and in the water) than many other tourist spots in Bali, thanks to the locals teaming up with the surf and dive communities to pounce on plastic.

Though the majority of visitors to the island are day trippers on big cruises, you really want to allow at least a few nights to get a feel for the place, settle in and — as we certainly did — to relax completely into the laid-back vibe.



Setting off on a snorkelling trip (top) and The Howff whisky bar.
Photos / Ann King Shahab



An offshore thing

DO: Nusa Lembongan is just 8sq km but is the most populated (with around 5000 residents) of the three-island chain that also includes tiny Nusa Ceningan and larger Nusa Penida to the south. We hired a couple of scooters (about \$8 a day) and went sightseeing. The north and east coast are home to mangrove forests, while the south coast has dramatic clifftop views. A sturdy new yellow suspension bridge joins

Lembongan and Ceningan — the previous version tragically collapsed under the weight of crowds crossing on the local holy “silence of the sea” day.

We stopped off to see the famous Blue Lagoon, churning waters meeting loose limestone to create an impressive milky blue wash. There are cliff-jumping points close-by, and a zipline too, but we weren’t up for such adventurous pursuits.

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Checklist NUSAS

GETTING THERE

Local companies sail to and from Lembongan every day. Bookings at Batu Karang Resort include ferry and transfers from the mainland. Most accommodation is along the main beaches Jungut Batu and Mushroom Bay. The former is home to the ferry offices, watersports centres and restaurants, while the latter is a bit quieter. Well-known surf breaks off Lembongan include Playgrounds, Lacerations and Shipwrecks. Surf can be great but also dangerous.

Back on Lembongan, we took a hilariously bumpy dirt road down to the west-facing clifftop that is home to tiny little Cloudland Bar. This isolated, basic little bar ticked the epic sunset box nicely: we lazed on beanbags on the sandy ground, sipping on mojitos as waves crashed below and the big red ball dropped all too quickly behind the watery horizon.

The ride home in the dark came with an unexpected adventure when a procession to the temple materialised and took up the road.

My husband and eldest child, ahead, had driven through just before, but my youngest and I found ourselves in the middle of the procession. There I was, feeling anxious that I was intruding on their ceremony, sitting there on our scooter, while dozens of villagers flowed past on either side, young and old, fruit and flower offerings stacked on heads, pressing on to the monotone rhythm of drums and chimes. But not an accusatory look did we receive, just smiles and that universal little 'Excuse us!' wave. The Balinese are wonderfully relaxed about their ceremonies.

Watersports is what the Nusa islands are most famous for: there are renowned surf breaks on the reef within a stone's throw of Jungut Batu, which cater to all levels — from grommet to hardcore. SUP and scuba enthusiasts are also well looked after. And better suited to my family's capabilities, the snorkelling here is fantastic. There are more than 500 varieties of coral and reef fish in the waters around here, a release station for the endangered Pacific Ridley Turtle and a manta ray "cleaning station" — an area where these gentle shark-relatives congregate to be cleaned by small fish.

We booked a tour with Ketut on his boat Dolphin, visiting five snorkelling spots around the three Nusa islands, starting with Manta Point on the coast of Penida. There, the water was too rough to tempt the kids and we tried to track down a few mantas without success. Ketut (who was a gem, forever helping our two kids with their equipment) was determined, taking us to another less known spot where we had success, getting in a good swim with a couple of big beauties before other boats got the idea and joined in.

At Crystal Bay, the kids found their fins among scores of brightly coloured fish but we all agreed our favourite spot of the day was our last, Mangrove Bay off Lembongan, where Ketut dropped us at one end of the bay for us to drift snorkel with the current while he watchfully waited a few hundred metres away.



There are no ATMs but some operators will organise cash out, with fees: it's better to bring enough cash over with you.

EAT AND DRINK: There are many warungs along the coast, and at any of them you'll get a decent nasi goreng, chicken curry or French fries if they're required. We loved the all-day offering at The Deck, right on the water at the south end of Jungut Batu, where everything possible — including breads, pastries, sauces and ice cream — is made on site. A few steps away is Muntigs, also open from breakfast, through to dinner with a romantic, candlelit vibe, as guests are seated around the swimming pool and just above the lapping waves.

Metres along the boardwalk, The Thai Pantry makes killer cocktails from a cute, kitted-out Kombi, as well as classic Thai dishes like larb, pad Thai and curries.

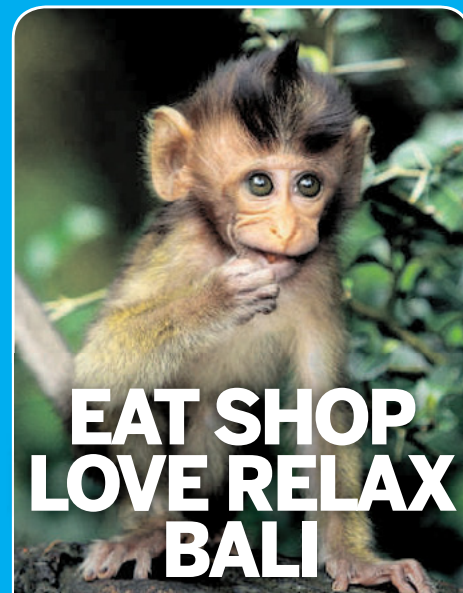
At the other end of Jungut Batu, Ginger & Jamu was our go-to for its healthful menu of smoothies (glass or pimped-up bowl), nachos and tacos.

The surprise discovery of our stay though was a speak-easy whisky bar at the beach, called The Howff. Tucked away below ground level under The Deck, it is kind of the folly of Batu Karang's Aussie owners who claim Scots heritage and decided to bring a bit of the Highlands to the Nusas. They don't advertise, they just wait for folks with a nose for a good malt to uncover this secret. There's also a G&T menu to rival any cosmopolitan bar.

STAY: Accommodation options include private villas, bungalow complexes and a very small number of higher end properties. We stayed at the island's most comprehensive premium offering, Batu Karang Resort, which took us less than a minute to reach on foot from the white sands of Jungut Batu, where the ferry dropped us off. (There is no wharf on Lembongan so be prepared to wade a little).

Occupying a cliff site at the south end of the beach, five-star Batu Karang consists of a range of suites and villas climbing the steep hill. Golf carts are on hand but I liked the steep hike a few times a day.

There's a spa and gym, two pools — including a 25m lap pool at the top — while down on the waterfront a third pool is flanked by the restaurant. The site offers what is surely the island's best view, nowhere more so than from the top-of-the-hill suites in which we stayed: you look straight out over clear turquoise waters at the looming, majestic (and sometimes quite cranky) Mt Agung volcano on the mainland.



Bali is best known for its white sandy beaches, legendary surf and iconic terraced rice fields. But, Bali offers much more than that. Here are our top picks for a diverse Balinese experience.

Cooking Class — this is a great way to introduce yourself to Balinese cuisine and recreate the taste of Bali back at home. Familiarise yourself with the ingredients that make Balinese food pleasantly tasty and learn the techniques of Balinese cooking.

Taste Authentic Food — whether it's from a high end restaurant or a street food stall, don't leave Bali without trying **Babi Guling** (suckling pig). This is possibly one of Bali's most traditional and local dishes to try.

Shop till you drop — Bali is a shoppers paradise offering a varied shopping scene from shopping malls to street markets and from fixed prices' to bargains! We recommend putting your bargaining skills to the test at **Ubud Art Market** or **Sukawati Art Market**. For a unique shopping and dining experience, head to one of Bali's night markets.

Monkey Forest Ubud — explore around 12.5 hectares of forest which is home to around 700 Balinese long-tailed monkeys that roam free through the trees and temples. Walk through the forest and be entertained by the playful monkeys but be mindful that all your belongings are secure as the monkeys will find anything that they can grab and run with it. This sanctuary is also home to three Hindu Temples.

Water Park — you don't have to be a kid to enjoy **Waterbom Bali**. With 16 rides and attractions, you can easily spend a whole day enjoying the great range of exciting water slides.

Wellness Retreats — take some time out from exploring, to nourish your mind, body and soul at one of the many wellness retreats. We recommend **The Yoga Barn** in Ubud which is dedicated to healing and renewal or for an indulgent treatment try the palatial **Prana Spa** in Seminyak.

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From top: A breakfast bowl at Muntigs; A ginger smoothie on Nusa Lembongan; View from the balcony at Nusa Lembongan. Photos / Anna King Shahab