

TRAVEL + LEISURE

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*A Step
Beyond Bali*

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TOKYO

BRISBANE'S
BIRTH OF COOL

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▲ Island dreaming at Batu Karang, Nusa Lembongan (page 66).

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Green hero Batu Karang Resort & Spa, on Nusa Lembongan. Photograph by Stephan Kotas.

In Balance

A bit beyond Bali, boats bob in waters so clear you can see their shadows in the sand. Beach clubs ask only that you shed your pretensions with your flip-flops. And mola molas and mantas remind us of the important things. From a cliffside resort at the heart of Nusa Lembongan, **JENINNE LEE-ST. JOHN** finds paradise is draped in bougainvillea.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
STEPHAN KOTAS

*Looking north from
Nusa Lembongan
to Bali and Mount
Agung.*



ON ONE OF THOSE SO-PRETTY-IT-HURTS BALI DAYS—CLEAR, CORNFLOWER- BLUE SKIES,

a whisper of a breeze in the air—I gathered up my hangover, feebly rolled my suitcase down the dock and nudged it in the direction of the porter, and boarded a ferry for salvation.

Most of the hour-long ride was blessedly smooth, but the water got choppy and the boat slowed, rousing me as we pulled in view of land. I couldn't wait to get off—until I did, and found myself on the 10-kilometer string of giant Legos they were passing off as a pier. OK, maybe it wasn't 10 kilometers, but it sure felt like it mincing gingerly down those square floaties lashed together, a red plastic-brick road in a shallow mangrove cove, the occasional wake sending small ripples to big effect, my internal equilibrium threatening to betray me with every step.

I was overjoyed when I set foot on shore, and not just because none of my electronics had gone for an



FOOD AND ROOM: COURTESY OF BATU KARANG

▲ Clockwise from top left: Wisnu, of Batu Karang, gladly scoots guests to Dream Beach; a casual gourmet lunch at Muntigs; a private-pool room at Batu Karang; one of the resort's three pools; hit the waves with Cakil, founder of Lembongan Surf Lesson.

accidental swim. As the last of the passengers alighted, deeply tanned guys in red-and-white uniforms and ball caps headed out with homemade wheelbarrows to fetch our luggage. It reminded me of a long-ago trip to the Brazilian island of Tinhare, where men with wheelbarrows greeted our catamaran from Salvador city. The wheelbarrows had TAXI painted on the sides, because the island had no cars and how else were you supposed to get your suitcases from the pier over hill, dale and rocky coastline to your *pousada* on the beach?

Tinhare was incredibly, adorably remote, despite its geographic proximity to the mainland, a time-warp of calm, shallow beaches; of family-owned hotels, and family neighborhoods intact, not yet

pushed out by development. This was what I was looking for in Nusa Lembongan and I took the wheelbarrows as a sign that I was going to get it.

Facing Sanur on Bali's southeast coast, a satellite of the much larger, more prehistoric, dive destination Nusa Penida, Nusa Lembongan (along with its little sister isle Ceningan) is much closer to Bali than the Bali of most people's imaginations. Ringed by the seaweed farms that provide the livelihoods for most of the island's 5,000 residents, it's a laid-back idyll with no branded hotels but also very few bothersome hawkers. It has flat, glassy waters begging you to standup paddleboard on and snorkel in them, off-shore reef breaks real surfers seek out for their two-meter barrels, southerly cliffs carved out by dramatic white-capped whirlpool tides, and easy access to the dive sites of Penida that are famous for their mola molas and manta rays.

A Batu Karang butler picked me up at the ferry along with another solo American, a Californian wrapping up his business trip to Singapore with some impromptu island chill. His was a family of divemasters, he said: "My daughter is so jealous I'm here." As we crested the final hill, a shimmering bay came into view, Jungut Batu beach, a fat swath of turquoise painted nearly to the top of the canvas, capped by the fog-obfuscated dark outline of Mount Agung, across the sea in Bali. I immediately understood why the folks at Batu Karang had wanted me to take the ferry that docked on Jungut Batu instead. But surely something this marvelous from afar wouldn't be so pretty close up, I thought.

WHEN, A FEW MINUTES, later we got to Batu Karang's pool-centered reception area and main restaurant and found curtains of magenta bougainvillea framing a brilliant stage of sea to sky blue, I realized how wrong I was.

Built into a steep cliff, Batu Karang is a high-rise oriented resort. A lane winds back and forth across the narrow plot along which its greenery-enclosed private villas afford gorgeous sweeps of the bay. In mine, a gossamer-swathed bed faced the tall glass doors and the deck, which wrapped around to the outdoor bath and shower—it was basically #viewsfordays in or out of your skivvies. The top of the property is crowned by a small hotel-style building, two more pools, a bar and the spa.

The topography of the island ensures that staying at Batu Karang weaves you into the fabric of Lembongan. The public footpath—lined with hand-painted signs for hotels and villas, and a VW van-cum-Thai restaurant painted the baby blue of the bay below—divides the main resort from its loungey resto-bar The Deck. Tucked beneath that is The Howff, a passion project pretty gutsy given its setting. It's a pirate-vibe whisky bar, a leather couch-lined speakeasy whose design and liquor selection would place it easily in a quiet corner of a



cached-up metropolis but in fact hangs open-air over crashing waves, offering drinkers a front-row seat to paddleboarders tooling by during the day and the planetarium of stars at night.

One afternoon I took a mixology class with two cheery Australian women—we each selected a drink on the menu to make and standing there measuring out jiggers with the bartenders while watching the day’s last surfers ride in on the deepening turquoise, I wondered why any hotel would ever suggest I learn to do anything in a room without a view. This view.

It was the empty surf breaks that first drew Aussie Troy Sinclair to Nusa Lembongan in 1999. Experienced in hospitality, he got his MBA in hotel and tourism management. His sister, Alex, worked in design and marketing, and their brother, Ashley, was in building and construction management, as was their father, Alan, who owned a project- and construction-management company for 40 years. Mom Elizabeth, now known at Batu Karang as *Ibu* (“high boss”), was in spas and had been a nurse and a flight attendant. This family was practically engineered to build what was the island’s first upscale accommodation, and remains its nicest—as long as they were all up for a massive challenge.

The Sinclairs partnered with then-village chief Johnny Tarzan in planning what became a community-wide hands-on groundbreaking. That’s a literal truth: the entire property was excavated by hand, some 6,000 cubic meters of coral stones (“batu karang”) that were then hand-carved into the retaining and driveway walls that line the property. A local husband-and-wife team dug the two original wells, 43- and 27-meters deep, also by hand.

The villas were built by locals using traditional techniques and sustainable timber, and each year, among its community-empowerment initiatives, Batu Karang offers hospitality internships for at least 20 students. All organic waste from this single-use-plastic-free property is passed to farmers for animal feed. On site they have nine absorption wells, a water-purification system and a reverse-osmosis sewage treatment plant, which breaks down gray water into nutrient-rich fertilizer that is partly used for the greenery and the hydroponic garden.

“We didn’t do this because we wanted to be all green,” Troy tried to front—because we both know they clearly are, and admirably so. “My dad and I sat down and looked at the logistics. In Seminyak you just plug your pipe into their pipe, like you do everywhere else in the world. But we didn’t have that luxury. This is a place with no infrastructure, no sewage. We weren’t going to contribute to hurting it. I said, ‘Dad, I surf out there. We aren’t going to toss our garbage out there.’”

THERE ARE, HOWEVER, signs of tourism pollution on the horizon. I spotted offshore what looked like the set from *Waterworld* stripped of its



dystopia then Disney-fied: a castle with waterslides and watermills and trampolines, roped into a patch of oceanic real estate. Troy made a valiant attempt at masking his chagrin while he explained that it was a day-trippers’ floating theme park, to which tourists are shuttle-bussed then -boated from Bali for a few hours to splash in serene, transparent waters the likes of which you could never get there.

Its presence felt at odds with the rest of the island, a mass-market encroachment on a place that is small-town wholesome.

The Sinclairs have been here for two decades, it occurred to me. It seemed like the perfect place to launch a boutique hotel. Why, I wondered aloud, didn’t they have more competition?

You could look at Bali as being just an hour’s boat ride away for potential guests. But, Troy told me, you also have to look at it as being an entire hour’s boat ride away from even the most basic necessities. Everything needs to be shipped in. Even if you’re paying just a few pennies per item to each of the people along the supply chain, that adds up. The local governments are different, as well, so the minimum wage on Lembongan is higher than in

Bali, Mitch Ansiewicz explained to me later. Bad news for people looking for bargain-basement backpacker-cheap, great for those who want creature-comforts cool in a slow-life place that still feels undiscovered.

Great, that is, for the clientele of Ohana’s, the beach club Ansiewicz and his wife Ashleigh launched in 2018 at the northern end of Jungut Batu. Mitch, who grew up surfing on the Gold Coast and vacationing with his extended family in rental villas in Bali and Lembongan, left his job high up in an Australian financial-services firm for a fated second act that he said felt like coming home.

“We recognized a gap in the market. We knew a certain segment of people would love to come here but don’t want to come and sit in plastic chairs—even though Ashleigh and I actually do,” he laughed as we grazed on tuna *tataki*, fried giant prawns and pizza one evening. They had invited me to have drinks with them and Mitch’s cousin and his wife who happened to be in town, driving home the place’s name: *Ohana* means family in Hawaiian.

They borrowed ideas from their favorite spots in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney, and they visited every beach club in Bali, too, for inspiration on what they did and didn’t want for their own place. The result is a buzzing, pretense-free seaside lounge on the island’s main drag where the cabanas, beach chairs and pool are oriented west for the sunset’s daily IMAX show over the ocean. “I’d promote Lembongan as more exclusive than Bali,” Mitch said.

When I was visiting Lembongan last November, midway through a resort-hopping trip around the



▲ Clockwise from top left: Search for elusive mola molas with Blue Corner Dive; Ohana’s serves nouveau-Aussie fresh fare poolside; Yellow Bridge connects Nusa Lembongan to Nusa Ceningan; just after sunset at Ohana’s; morning prayer finished.

DIVING: COURTESY OF OLIVER, BLUE CORNER DIVE.





▲ From top: The Island, a hippie beach bar on Nusa Ceningan; mixing drinks at The Howff, Batu Karang's speakeasy; the ethereal Blue Lagoon, on Ceningan.



southern half of Bali, I thought of it as a perfect side jaunt, a place to be active but at ease, to level out mentally between glitzier and busier destinations. As I write this in the middle of Covid-19, I'm certain the island's brand of not-that-big-of-a-slog exclusivity is what more travelers will seek out for their main event as we all get our sea legs back.

BEWARE THE MOLA MOLA. They are ugly as sin and will scare the crap out of you. But if they do, you will be grateful. These giant ocean sunfish look like a kid's drawing of the lovechild between a shark and a flatfish, whose tail was chopped off and crimped like a dumpling.

Mola molas are a major draw for divers in Nusa Penida because it is one of the only places you'll find them in the region, and rarely at that since they live in deep, cold water, usually only coming to the surface in search of cleaner-fish to gobble parasites off their skin. After October (on through June) it's usually too warm at normal diving depth to see these prehistoric beasts. That I was there at the end of November was just one reason I was shocked when, diving along a shelf in Crystal Bay, I saw one.

A spectral shift from cerulean to cobalt marked a plummet in water temperature, and I was freaking myself out contemplating the vast increase in distance to the seafloor when a huge dark blob floated into my peripheral vision. It loomed like the Death Star. Just as I realized what it was, it turned and gracefully swam off in the opposite direction. I instinctively yelped, "mola mola!" before I remembered no one could hear me.

Crystal Bay is a popular destination for day-tripping beach bums and snorkel boats—probably too popular, but less-overrun Lembongan is better for it. One morning, I hopped on the back of a motorbike belonging to Wisnu, a front-office reception staff at Batu Karang. He set off to show me Mahigiri Beach, the flat, powdery northern tip of Lembongan, and Mangrove Point nearby, which has a thriving shallow reef colored in an Easter-egg array that makes it a ridiculous spot to snorkel. We had to make it quick: Lembongan Village was

holding a religious procession that day and if we didn't get back through the main drag before it began, we'd be stuck for who knew how long.

Wisnu then drove over the hill towards the island's south, passing barely there neighborhoods, corner stores selling gasoline in apple-juice jars, and cheap hostels and homestays tucked in the woods. We saw Dream Beach, a crescent of golden sand way at the bottom of a steep cliff, the most Southern European seaside here in terms of both terrain and vibe. Next was a drive-by of Devil's Tears, over-loved by Chinese tour groups who were in full swarm mode that day. Maniacal waves have been carving away this cliffside for millennia and watching them roar in, strike rock and often double-up on themselves is mesmerizing. It's also terrifying: tourists aggressively craning to get a photo of life on the edge have actually fallen off the edge into the churn. Rope fences were put up last year, but you'd be wise to keep an eye on the tide—and perhaps check out the northern side of the point, where there were far fewer visitors.

The cute Yellow Bridge connecting Lembongan to Ceningan was rendered almost comical in the low tide, when the seaweed flats emerged to the sun and it seemed I could just walk straight across. If Lembongan is Valium, Ceningan is Quaaludes. The coastal road is lined with dreamy beach bars where in each the lack of more than three customers seemed wholly inconsequential to the owners. At the islet's southern end there's a little keyhole cranny of a bay called Blue Lagoon, where the Egyptian-blue ocean froths along the shore like a vanilla milkshake. It still seems impossible to me how many starkly different breeds of beaches I lollygagged on in the space of a few hours.

Another early day, back on Jungut Batu, I had an appointment with Lembongan Surf Lesson. A Dutch girl (intermediate surfer) and German girl (beginner but ballsy) hitched a ride out on the boat to Razors with me and my chiseled, tattooed, bronzed and bleach-blond instructor, Cakil. Razors is known for being a fast, hollow lefthander, but this day's swell was smallish, the waves consistently catchable for me on my borrowed longboard.

On such a clear day with such ideal conditions anywhere else, you'd expect the break to be rammed with beginners on their big foam boards, but there were only five other tourists out for lessons with their teachers, and a few solo hobbyists. Riding in each time, I'd remind myself to look up and around at the panorama of bobbing boats, long lick of white sand beyond, the shaded wooden beach bar on the rocks, the village and trees encircling to the farthest reaches of my peripheral vision. In the center stood waterfront Segara Temple, where locals pray to Dewa Varuna, the god of the sea sustaining the islands. A good anchor for the equilibrium that came easy. ➤



Tarry awhile in Nusa Lembongan

Getting There

Fly to Bali then take one of the several daily fast ferries from Sanur. The schedules change with the tides and weather; it's simplest to book the land-sea transfer through your hotel (see below; transfers A\$50-70).

Stay

Batu Karang This laudably sustainable, community-minded resort has fantastic food in its picturesque eateries Muntigs and The Deck (do not sleep through breakfast), a seafront whisky bar, an ice-cream parlor, romantic villas and sweet staff. There's also a day lounge: you can check out of your room, catch your last waves then shower before your boat back to Bali. batukaranglembongan.com; doubles from A\$200, but contact the hotel for the reopening date.

Eat+Drink

Ohana's The vibe at this new, soft-white beach club flows straight from the Sydney

sensibilities and 90s hip-hop soundtrack of its young married owners, Mitch and Ashleigh Ansiewicz. They'll send a truck to fetch you, and light a bonfire poolside for marshmallow roasts. ohanas.co; meal for two Rp600,000.

Kayu Lembongan Garden-nestled veg-forward (there's also ahi and beef rendang) café with fare from local farmers, bakers, cheesemakers and brewers. kayulembongan.com; meal for two Rp200,000.

Thai Pantry A Bangkok-style converted VW van marks the spot for your seaside spice fix. thaipantrybali.com; meal for two Rp200,000.

Sandy Bay A patch of white sand near Devil's Tear houses this beach club and bar, bistro, spa and "beach shack" accomms complex. sandybaylembongan.com; meal for two Rp500,000; doubles from Rp120,000.

The Island Ceningan Rustic hippie beach bar on the tidal flat

facing Lembongan and the sunset framed through its IG-ready swing. fb.com/theislandceningan; drinks Rp60,000.

Hai Bar & Grill Pretty beachfront hangout on crystalline Mushroom Bay; screens movies under the stars. haitidebeachresort.com; meal for two Rp250,000.

Ginger & Jamu Another Canggu-style organic café with fare from local farmers, bakers, cheesemakers and brewers. kayulembongan.com; meal for two Rp200,000.

Do

The water is perfect for low-stress aqua sports like SUP, snorkeling and kayaking. If you dive, this is the closest best place to do it off Bali. Book with **Blue Corner Dive** (bluecornerdive.com) or **Twin Island Dive** (twinislanddive.com)—and check the water temps first; you might need a 4-mm wetsuit for the cold in Penida. Finally: surfing is a must! Hire Cakil at **Lembongan Surf Lesson** (lembongansurfllesson.com; lessons from Rp400,000). — J.L.S.J.