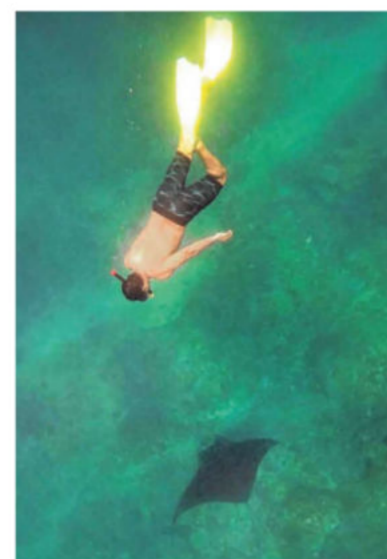




The magnificent archway at Broken Beach (left) is a magnet for tourists, while Kelingking Beach (above) is the most iconic image of Nusa Penida, with its rocky cliff nicknamed the T-Rex for its shape.



Snorkellers will appreciate the variety of marine life in Nusa Penida, including the chance to see manta rays. ST PHOTOS: STEPHANIE YEO

Savour Nusa Penida's sublime pleasures

Just a 40-minute ferry ride from Bali, Nusa Penida is often done as a day trip, but its many charms are best savoured over a long weekend

Stephanie Yeo
Senior Correspondent

NUSA PENIDA, Indonesia – The waves are choppy as the three boats gather, their captains chattering excitedly. They are here, they say.

We strap on our fins and snorkels, and jump. The shock of cold water against my sun-beaten body wakes every sense.

And then a lone manta ray glides into view below, a shadow in the depths. The coldness recedes and time slows



down as we trace its graceful loops. Two more manta rays appear, although none swim up high enough for us to snap a close-up selfie.

We clamber up on board our boat with wide smiles, but there is more to this snorkelling trip in Nusa Penida than just seeing mantas.

At Gamat Bay and Wall Point, the water is warmer and calmer, and there are fish and coral aplenty, to my surprise. A diver friend tells me later that Nusa Penida is also the best place to see the magnificent ocean sunfish.

Why have I only just discovered this gem of a place? And when can I come back?

Nusa Penida is one of those places many people have seen on Instagram but probably cannot place on a map. Most visitors are day-trippers from Bali who arrive on a 40-minute fast ferry, check off some of the scenic spots in the western half of the island and go snorkelling.

But the charms of Nusa Penida – along with those of its sister islands, Nusa Lembongan and Nusa Ceningan, all located south-east of

Bali – clearly deserve more than a shoot-and-scoot tour.

Nusa Penida's natural attractions are so sublime, it is hard to believe it was a former penal colony.

At Broken Beach, female tourists in bright summer dresses and bikini tops pose against the cove's massive archway. Their tour guides are all practised photographers who know just where to get the best angles, even if it means climbing up a tree.

There is a growing queue for the best photo spot at Angel's Billabong, a pretty tidal pool which, according to local folklore, is where angels bathe. You can dip inside on good days, but the tide is not in our favour when we visit.

Nusa Penida's most iconic image is perhaps Kelingking Beach, a breathtaking sweep of white sand fringed by aquamarine waters and a rocky cliff nicknamed the T-Rex for its shape.

There are more than 447,000 Instagram posts with the hashtag #kelingkingbeach and, standing at the top of the cliff, I can appreciate why. Its unfiltered beauty transfixes me for a few moments.

Then someone jostles me for my spot to take a photo for the 'Gram.

While we see a bit of a crowd at some attractions on the day-tripper itinerary, tourism numbers are still well below pre-Covid-19 levels, according to media reports. I wish we had time to visit Crystal Bay, said to be one of the best beaches here, but that will be another reason to return.

The eastern half of Nusa Penida is equally lovely. Diamond Beach and Atuh Beach are both magnificent cliff-tops overlooking turquoise water and white sand beaches.

The only disappointing stop is at Teletubbies Hill, said to resemble the rolling landscape in the eponymous children's television show. A recent fire has scarred the landscape but, even so, I would have skipped this on the tour if I had the choice.

Meanwhile, what few blogs and social media posts tell you is that getting to some of the best beaches here will require a combination of strong legs and sheer willpower.

The journey down to Atuh Beach, for instance, is via steep steps that take about 10 minutes to climb, but longer to get back up because some steps are very high. My husband, a former triathlete, returns looking like he has been caught in a downpour, muttering: "It's a workout."

It is beautiful down there, he says, but the current is too strong for a swim.

Similarly, Kelingking Beach has been said to take up to an hour to climb back up because the rocky staircase is incredibly steep. Nusa Penida's tourism infrastructure is still a work in progress. The roads are bumpy, the paths at attractions are often hilly and uneven, and the amenities could be better. But that is part of its laid-back lifestyle.

Mother Nature, however, must never be underestimated. In March, a tourist fell to his death while posing for photos at a 40m-high cliff at Broken Beach. Another tourist almost lost his life in 2022 when he tried to do a somersault for the camera on one of Nusa Penida's cliffs. A little bit of common sense and awareness of your surroundings goes a long way here.

At the end of our long days, it feels good to take a 10-minute boat ride back to our hotel at Nusa Lembongan instead of jostling with the crowds returning to Bali.

Our boutique hotel, Batu Karang Lembongan Resort & Spa, packs all the tropical villa mod cons – an outdoor shower, a bathtub big enough for two and a huge balcony with a day bed – with the quiet, chill-out vibe we need.

About half of the 39 villas, suites and rooms are occupied when we arrive in late March, which is the end of the rainy season.

The food at the eco-friendly hotel is delicious and healthy, a lethal combination that has me feeding on plant-based huevos rancheros and a pumpkin eggplant salad with abandon. Seventy-five per cent of the menu items use produce from its hydroponic garden.

We are so happy with our hotel that we do not even try the charm-



Hotels such as Batu Karang Lembongan Resort & Spa on Nusa Lembongan offer tropical villa luxuries without the maddening crowds of Bali. PHOTO: BATU KARANG LEMBONGAN RESORT & SPA

ing restaurants we see during a stroll on the beachfront.

There is a popular surfing spot farther up, although we see no swimmers at our end of the beach during our two-night stay. In any case, we have three pools to choose from.

A power trip after dinner on our first night plunges the resort into darkness for more than an hour, yet no one around us complains. It gets a bit stuffy, but we continue to sip our drinks at The Deck Cafe & Bar, admiring the constellations sparkling up above.

Later, a hotel staff member apologises to a guest who is ready to leave. "Don't worry," the traveller says. "This is island life."

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TRAVEL TIPS

Rates for Batu Karang Lembongan Resort & Spa (batukaranglembongan.com) start at 2,500,000 rupiah (about S\$223) nett a room a night, though we used Expedia travel app points to redeem our stay. There are several highly rated hotels in Nusa Penida as well. They tend to be boutique resorts rather than the big hotel chains you see in Bali.

Getting around means either hiring a motorcycle, or booking a driver or tour. Many young Western tourists were doing the former, but we were happy to slide into our air-conditioned van after so much walking in the unrelenting heat.

Expect a bumpy ride on board the ferry from Bali and on snorkelling boats. If you do not have sea legs, take anti-nausea pills beforehand.

Wear shoes or sandals with good traction as the ground at attractions is often uneven and rocky. Take along a hat, sunscreen, water, tissue paper and hand sanitiser. Toilet facilities at scenic spots are basic.



Weekend Trip is a series that looks at regional destinations through fresh eyes. For more travel stories, go to str.sg/travel

STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Some photo points at attractions require a small fee, but this is optional and you can take plenty of good pictures around the area without paying.

Tip your guide generously if he has impressed you. What is a few dollars to us means a lot more to them.

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