

Clockwise: one man, one plough; local children excited to see a stranger; traditional cockfighting.



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Beyond the beach

Remove the sand from between your toes and head to the heavenly hills of Bali. **BY IVAN SMITH**

THE INDONESIAN island of Bali has suffered recently thanks to its reputation. Those looking for a peaceful holiday have tried elsewhere because of the way towns have grown to accommodate surfers, backpackers and their social life.

But beyond Kuta and the like, Bali maintains its traditional face; it isn't hard to find. "I used to go to Kuta for supplies. Then one day I go back and it is completely changed," says one farmer on the pace of change. But barely 20 minutes drive north of this instant metropolis and it seems change of any kind has yet to arrive.

Here is the true Bali: friendly, rural, subsistent and slow-moving. Terrorism may have taken the wind out of urban sails for now, but in the country, the tranquillity is complete.

Development has happened, but organically, respectfully. Hidden in the village of Cepaka are a pair of modern, luxurious villas: accommodation to rival anything on the island. Both located below ground level; it is hard to believe there is anything here at all.

In this farming community on the south-west coast, the real Balinese character shows through. Far more friendly than the "Hey, Mister, you looking?" harassments of Kuta,

If you can be prised from the pools, the massage loungers and the endless rounds of caipiroskas served by efficient staff (all drawn from the village), it is worth a walk along the quiet, steaming lanes between the paddy fields. They farm here like they must have hundreds of years ago: one farm, one man, one plough. I ask why the community doesn't just gang up and buy a tractor. They might do, is the shrugged reply, one day.

In the meantime, the stubble is driven back into the soil by the plodding buffalo dragging a wedge of iron. Behind, the farmer clucks

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instructions, forcing the beast in endless U-turns around the tiny jigsawed sections.

At the side of the road sits a gang of farm workers, their tools rested against their knees as the foreman issues instructions. He talks a long time and they listen seriously.

The villa can provide a vehicle and driver to take you on a more conventional trip, up into the mountains to Ubud. It's a well-known artistic community, a degree or two cooler and fresher than the jungle below, and very pretty. Thanks in no small part to the number of artisans and ex-pats in Ubud,

the market is a cut above the usual T-shirts and sunglasses to be found in Kuta. Some of the Balinese handicrafts are both extremely well-made and useful.

Another offshoot of the Ubud culture is the number of arts and crafts courses on offer, from batik and dance to cookery. For lunch, we eat in the Lotus Café, at a pretty location by a temple famous for its lotus ponds; for dinner at Mozaic, where you can try some of the best food in all of Bali in a romantic garden setting.

In this climate, the idea of a cycle ride

might seem insane: humidity can be over 90 per cent, the heat intense and the only way is up. Or down. For a small fee Bali Adventure Tours picks you up and drives for miles, up and out of the jungle, where all you have to do is collect the bike and the guide and freewheel back down.

After days surrounded on both sides by thick belts of trees, it is a relief to be above them, gazing out over the barren foothills of Mt Bauer volcano. The ride down through the villages and the verdant natural chaos of jackfruit, banyan, coconut and coffee bushes

is a strange, if gratifying experience.

Everyone is glad to see you; they wave and smile; children shout in excited greeting. Out of nowhere you will suddenly hear "Hello!" from some hidden infant. I ask our guide what the fuss is. "No one comes up here," he smiles. "It is a big event."

Off-road, we encounter communities of perhaps three or four dwellings – not poor, but basic; neat and well-maintained. People seem happy and, above all, friendly. It is a national characteristic, not just a smile put on by waiters and market-stall owners.

I can feel my tension being taken away, to be replaced with the feeling that I should probably just surrender to the place.

Back at the villa, I wash the cycle ride off in the pool. When I surface, a smiling member of staff offers me a drink. Last time I was in Bali a man on the beach tried to sell me a crossbow. Is it too early for a beer? Of course not. This visit seems to make a lot more sense. ■

Ivan Smith travelled courtesy of Air Paradise International. For bookings and enquiries phone 13 66 66 or contact your travel agent.

For more information on the villas, see www.baliluxuryvillacollection.com, www.bali-villasungai.com and www.bali-villakembali.com or telephone Pamela Hayes on 0410 324 535.

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