

SILKWINDS

Edition May June 2010



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LOMBOK

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BALI

Photo: Michael M. Hill

A DESTINATION IS NOT JUST A PLACE, IT'S A NEW WAY OF SEEING THINGS

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Luxury Lombok

Bali's nearest neighbour is going five-star, Kate Graham discover how this little island is heading for the big time.

WELCOME to Kuta Beach, where miles of shining white sands are shaded by gently waving palm trees and couples paddle in a surf quiet enough to hear each blue-green wave crash on the shore. But hold on, where are the hordes of surfers and banging music beats? What about the noisy beach traders and fast food sellers? Wrong Kuta. This isn't busy Bali, this is Lombok, just a 25-minute hop away and one of the finest unspoilt islands in Indonesia

Party people beware; Lombok is all about peace and quiet. Horse-drawn carts clatter down dirt roads and waterfalls cascade through thick forest, all against the backdrop of a soaring mountain and a traditional culture that is still the heartbeat of the island. However, that doesn't mean luxury has to take a back seat. Bali's "little sister" is now firmly five-star, offering world-class resorts and beautiful boutique hotels. Appealing to high-end travellers means the island is balancing its natural beauty with top-end traveller expectations. It is a winning combination.

Lombok is an island with a fascinating history. Believed to be inhabited by people from India and Burma before the 17th century, it is home to 2.3 million people today, the majority of whom are Sasak, whose culture blends both Hindu and Muslim beliefs. Proud of their culture, locals hold firmly to their traditions and villages called *kampungs* still thrive here. In Banyumulek, beautiful terracotta pottery is still produced using 16th-century methods while in Sukerare traditional cloth is woven into patterns handed down within families for generations.

Both these villages are in Kuta, on the south of Lombok. Looking around, it is little wonder this area was the chosen location for the new luxurious Novotel. With the mountains rising behind and lush greenery all around, it is the perfect getaway spot. Make time to explore Tanjung Aan, a beautiful beach nearby where the unusual grains of sand are large and circular. Of course, no trip to Kuta is complete without a day spent

in the island's world famous surf. Gerupuk Bay has both small swells for beginners and bigger waves for those seeking a challenge.

Kuta isn't the only spot for luxury on Lombok On the northwest of the island is the Oberoi, a world-class hideaway with 24 acres of green gardens and 550 meters of private golden beach. After whiling some time away in the gorgeous pool and fine spa facilities, hop on a boat to the nearby Gili islands. Rightly lauded as one of the world's top diving spots, these three specks of land are all true island paradises, each now featuring chic hotels and beachside eateries. Let the hotel organise a private boat and spend a day hopping between the three (Gili Trawangan is the most developed, spend a night in the luxurious Desa Dunia or Kelapa Luxury Villas and you won't regret it. Gili Air is rustic and Gili Meno is low-key and laidback), Walk barefoot on the beach or hail a *cidomo* (cars are banned, which all adds to the peaceful atmosphere), snorkel through the crystal clear waters and enjoy a gourmet picnic packed for you by Oberoi's chefs.

Small is also beautiful on Lombok. Tugu is part of a wave of boutique spots to hit the island. Set on the northwest coast, on the otherwise untouched Sire sands, are six hectares of lush palm plantation. Here, under thatched roofs, are some of the finest boutique bedrooms in Asia, filled with gorgeous antiques and oversized furniture. Inspired by the ancient Hindu traditions of the island, the architecture tells the stories of gods and legends. With a relaxed eat-where-you-wish philosophy, guests can enjoy the delicious cuisine amid intricately carved statues by candlelight or relax on cushions under the extraordinary rooster roof. Alternatively, for something truly special, reserve some time on the Tugu boat, called the Naga Sasra. Decorated with an antique dragon head, it takes guests for sunrise breakfast picnics on the calm morning sea.

A beautiful spa and meditation centre has just opened, filled with ancient Buddhist artefacts. Where better to enjoy yoga, as the sun rises over Mount Rinjani in the distance. At 3,726 metres, this is the second highest volcano in Indonesia and, for those seeking a challenge, makes a fantastic climb. There is a spiritual air to the spot. Sasak locals believe the site to be sacred, created when monkeys played with the moon and broke it into three pieces, each becoming a mountain. The summit in particular is believed to be home to the holy goddess Anjani and is a popular pilgrimage site.

The soaring mountain is just part of the Mount Rinjani National Park and with 41,000 hectares of thick flora and fauna it is advised to have a guide to make the most of your time here. From the top, you'll get spectacular views of the island below, but if the thought of the climb is too much, exploring the wildlife still makes a wonderful way to spend a few hours. Take time to visit Sendang Gile waterfall, fed by cold, crisp water from one of the highest peaks in Southeast Asia. A second waterfall, Tiu Kelep, is an hour's walk through forest and over rocks, but well worth it. It is said by locals that swimming in its deliciously cool water means you will live one year longer.

After exploring the untouched nature that Lombok has to offer, why not spend the night on the west of the island in the stylish Qunci Villas that offer minimalist luxury and a real away-from-it-all vibe? The bar and restaurant boast beautiful views, but for the best view of all, stay in the jaw-dropping hillside Villa Qusia, With your own butler, three bedrooms and enormous living area, you can unwind in total luxury and drink in the views of Bali's Mount Agung in the distance.

Nearby on the island are other five-star villas. The new Segara offers spacious accommodation, filled with antique ornaments, warmly polished woods and a view to die for. Private gardens and indoor/outdoor bathrooms finish that five-star feel. The friendly staff can organise a range of cultural activities, including pottery and cooking classes and soft treks through the forests. Imaj Private Villas are just 15 minutes from Mataram airport but offer a haven of peace. Or for the ultimate in privacy and luxury, book the Sepoi Sepoi, a fully staffed, six bedroom villa with infinity pool and beach. Here you can snorkel with turtles or wander through rice paddies, always able to return to the comforts of five-star accommodation.

It's this combination of luxury, laid back atmosphere and untouched nature that Qunci owner Scott Coffey believes makes this island so special. "We have peace, tranquility and an unrushed feel to things," he says, "Like Bali was 15 years ago. The often-touted expression is: you can find Bali in Lombok but you can't find Lombok in Bali."