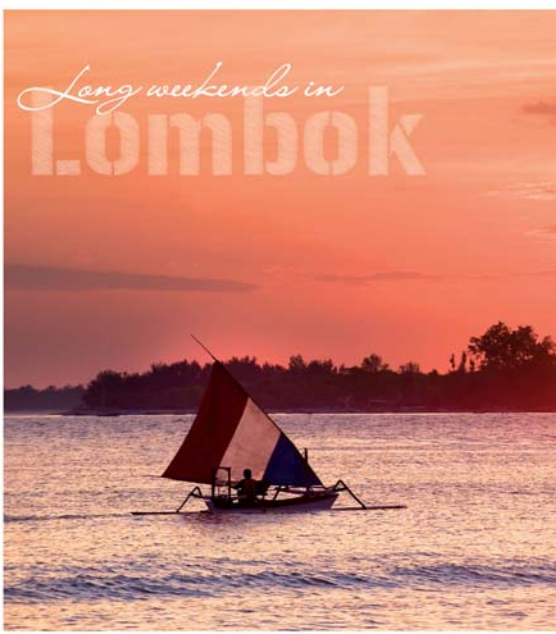


EXPAT LIVING – LONG WEEKEND IN LOMBOK

Edition June 2011 – Sepoi Sepoi

TRAVEL FEATURE



Long weekends in
Lombok

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TRAVEL FEATURE



The few people who go to Lombok often describe it as “Bali with beaches” – meaning proper, white-sandy beaches. Others remember that this little-visited neighbour, just a 25-minute flight from Denpasar, is how Bali used to be before the tourist boom – lush, green terraces of gardens stretching off into the distance, isolated villages oozing peaceful charm, a laidback way of life and, of course, pristine waters perfect for snorkelling and diving. But Lombok is more than this, much more, as JON STONHAM found out during a long weekend retreat at Villa Sepoi Sepoi.

Most visitors arrive in Lombok either by a short hop from Bali by plane or a slightly longer boat ride (speed boat or regular ferry). Singapore, though, has its own direct international flights – Silk Air, three times a week – and flight times are such that it's perfect for an extended weekend. Leave the office Thursday lunchtime and catch the 15.35, and two and a half hours later you will be emerging from the almost deserted Selaparang Airport just outside the capital Mataram.

The airport may be tiny and quaint, but its visa-on-arrival and immigration service bears no resemblance to chaotic Bali's. Less than an hour later, we arrived at **Sira Beach** and Sepoi Sepoi, after heading north through rural villages including the tourist centre of **Senggigi** and along coastline almost bereft of development, let alone traffic. Talk about a change of pace!

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At 7.30pm, cocktails were served at the cabana poolside bar with a gentle breeze drifting up the beach and across the wide lawn. Meanwhile, the staff prepared our first dinner: spring rolls followed by curried king prawns and succulent chicken satay with rice and fresh steamed vegetables, and homemade chocolate cake and ice cream for desert.

Meals at the villa are taken family-style (a few dishes shared by everyone, though kids can be catered for separately); they are generally ordered a day in advance as provisioning is done in Senggigi. We ordered the first two days' food from the villa's suggestion menu when we booked, and then worked with the chef each day. As you only pay for the groceries plus a small mark up, the costs are tiny – expect to pay about US\$20 per person per day and eat like a king! The highlight for us was the beachside barbecue.

As a tropical island escape, Sepoi Sepoi is almost a cliché with its six, thatch-roofed bedrooms, swaying coconut trees and nearby volcano providing a stunning backdrop. We're not talking driftwood beach but here, we're talking five-star service, chill out movie room and a 100-square-metre master suite. Air conditioned and fully staffed, the villa is built in traditional Lombok style but has state-of-the-art facilities. The buildings are constructed from locally quarried stone and roofed in thatch to create a purely tropical yet very ethnic feel. The 20m pool takes pride of place. Shady balconies (gazebos) entice you in for quiet moments – for a massage, or just to enjoy the cool gentle sea breeze for which Villa Sepoi Sepoi is named.

It would be very easy to do absolutely nothing at the villa, but Lombok does have a huge amount to offer. We had four days to fill. The kids were keen to visit a glass-bottomed boat and hop across to the **Gili Islands**. Once there, they snorkelled and dived with the turtles (and sharks!) while we sipped a beer and soaked up the vibe of these three coral-tinged gems, where the only transport is horses and carts or bicycles. The gillies in the group managed a quick 15 holes at deserted **Lombok Golf Kowaida Country Club**. The club even sent a buggy over to pick them up!

Lombok is famous for its arts and crafts. On a day trip to the local villages, we saw pottery being made and some traditional cloth-weaving. **Sweet's Herbs** market sells pretty much everything made on the island, good for those who want a quick shopping solution.

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TRAVEL FEATURE



For those keen on pearls, Lombok's nutrient-rich coastal waters are well known for producing some fine specimens. Specialist retail outlets in **Sekarabela** stock a huge selection.

Also on our itinerary was a visit to one of the traditional thatched villages of Lombok's **Sasak** tribe, to learn about their ancient and unique culture. Be prepared for some hard selling from village children who are keen to show you their homemade arts and crafts, but don't let this put you off.

We didn't have enough time to investigate **Tanjung**, the nearby market village with stalls of local produce such as locally grown tobacco, coffee, soyas and peanuts, or to trek the towering 3,726m **Mount Rinjani** volcano. It takes two to three days to climb, camping along the way. Sadly we also missed **Senaru** village, gateway to **Rinjani National Park** where local Sasak guides will show you the two beautiful waterfalls of **Sindang Gila** and **Tua Kelep**. But then again, we have good reasons to return for another weekend escape.

Our flight back on Monday night had us in Singapore the same evening – refreshed and invigorated after experiencing a little bit of Swiss Family Robinson, Lombok style. ■

Want to go?

ACCOMMODATION: **Villa Sepoi Sepoi** (www.sepoi-sepoi.com). The villa has six en-suite bedrooms, but can be booked as four-bedroom accommodation at certain times of the year. Prices start from just over US\$1,000 per night including taxes and service charges. There are a few other villas in the area; see them on www.privatehomesand Villas.com.

GETTING THERE: **Silk Air** flies three times a week direct from Singapore (www.silkair.com). **Jet Air** (www.jetair.co.id), **Garuda Airlines** (www.garuda-indonesia.com), **Merpati Airlines** (www.merpati.co.id) and **Ratavia Air** (www.batavia-air.co.id) all have flights to Lombok, many of them from Bali and Jakarta.

BEST TIME TO GO: Dry season is May to September. Wet season is October to March.

CURRENCY: Indonesian rupiah

June 11 **OUTLIVING** 299

LONG WEEKEND IN LOMBOK

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