Bumming around Bali

There are few things more infuriating for an Englishman than walking down the street and having someone call out "'Ello mate" every 10 meters. It's similar to strolling around Ibiza, where the drug dealers approach you and say, "All right, Del Boy. Want some coke?" At least the Thais have it down to a straightforward "Hey you".

The Aussies have taken over Bali and in doing so they've made Kuta and Legian a kind of second home. However, when it comes to travel, first impressions count for nothing.

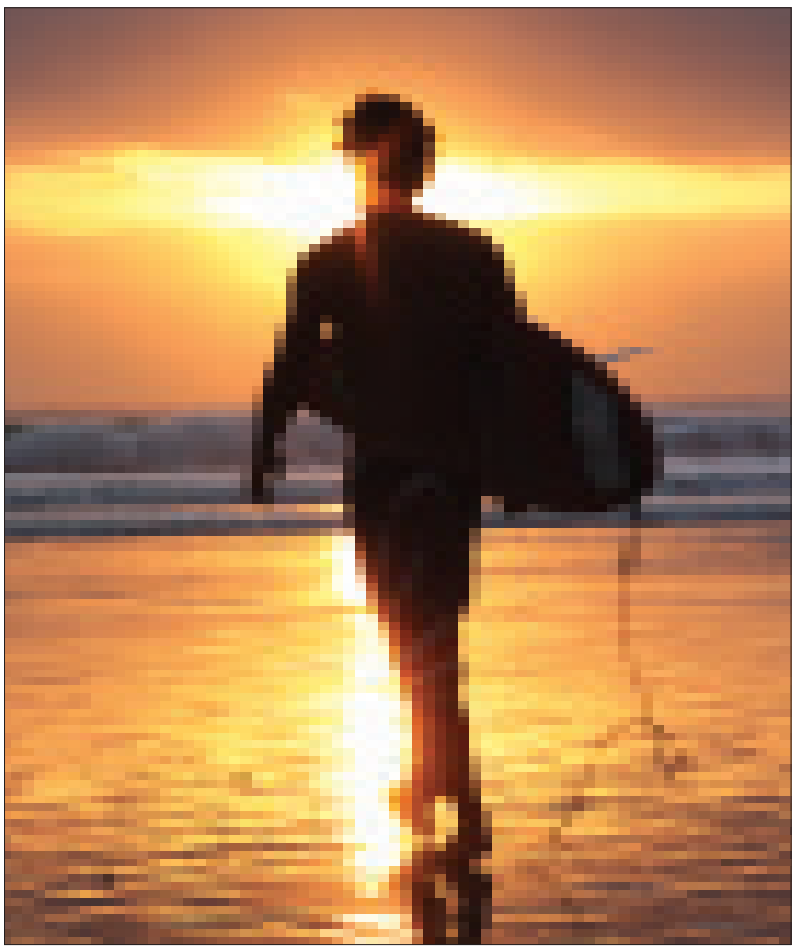
Bali is a breeze to reach from Phuket. One of the cheapest ways is to take an Air Asia flight to Singapore (about 3,000 baht) and then connect to Bali (about another 3,000 baht). I reached Bali and the hustle began as taxi drivers accosted my companion and me for business.

If you only have a few bags you can walk straight out of the international-departures terminal and hail a metered cab; otherwise you have to pre-book one from the small kiosk to right of the exit. Booking the taxi cost 55,000 rupiah, while the same trip back, with the driver running his meter, cost 50,000, which brings us to the subject of money.

You should visit Bali – it's a wonderful place with some jaw-dropping scenery – but clue yourself up about the money before you go, or else you'll change your money, become a multimillionaire and have an awful time of it dividing, converting and knocking zeros off. To make matters even more confusing, there are times when prices in Bali are quoted in US dollars even though nobody actually accepts US dollars, except Immigration, which charges US$25 for a 30-day stay and US$10 for a week. But only the savviest of travelers ever has US dollars, so the rest of the tourists must pay 250,000 or 100,000 rupiah – only a small difference.

My girlfriend and I had a week in Bali. We took to the roads with a battered Yamaha Mio and set about hunting down any point of interest that we could reach by motorbike. The furthest we made it to was Ubud – a beautiful spot about 25 kilometers north of Denpasar. The trip can supposedly be done in an hour, but a myriad of wrong turns led us on a magical mystery tour of Denpasar.

At one point a Balinese cop stopped us for turning right when we should have turned left. We were most apologetic and were of course leaving tomorrow and had neither the time to go to court nor the funds to cough up the 200,000-rupiah fine, so would the Balinese cop let us off, just this once, pretty please? We handed over 50,000 rupiah, the cop shook our hands and told my (Thai) girlfriend of his fondness for Japanese girls, and we were on the road again.



Most people don't go to Bali for lush backdrops and views; they go for beaches.

The signpost network in Bali is either unfinished or slightly above my level of understanding. A good map would have served us much better.

We arrived at Ubud and it was spectacular in parts. If you go, hunt out Ibu Oka's babi guling restaurant. We went there on a tipoff and it really was the best suckling pig I've ever had – a great meal for 30,000 rupiah. With only a day to spend in Ubud, we found a hill and drove up it, passing rice paddies all the way. At one point, we turned right and snaked down through tiny green villages full of people who were just amazed to see us. There were no tourists, no shops except tiny shacks, and no touts feigning terrible Aussie accents.

Other than rice paddies, Ubud is full of art in all its various guises. There are wood carvings, paintings, jewelry, knick knacks, clothing, textiles and anything else you could ever imagine, all sold at prices much cheaper than in other parts of Bali.

Other than Ubud, we made one trip to the Tanah Lot rock formation, which would be such a great place to visit had it not been turned into a tourist trap. "International" visitors pay 10,000 rupiah, while "domestic" travelers only have to stump up 7,000 rupiah. To even find the rock formation you have to bustle your way through markets selling tacky goods and various banalities that the Asian busloads seem to enjoy.

Tanah Lot is an amazing sight, with the waves thundering against the rocks beneath small temples and shrines. The best time to visit is during sunset when budding photographers go loopy for the morphing oranges and reds that stretch out to the horizon.

Most people don't go to Bali for lush backdrops and views; they go for beaches. Bali is enormous – about 10 times bigger than Phuket – and so there is far more to see than in the beach hangouts in the immediate vicinity of Denpasar. However, with only a week in Bali, we were all for loafing around in the sea without having to put the effort into really "traveling".

Kuta Beach is the main one. It's about 5km long and far broader than any of Phuket's beaches. The waves are large enough for some decent surfing and you can only swim in certain areas. The beach would be stunning were it not for the backdrop of fast food outlets and discos and bars.

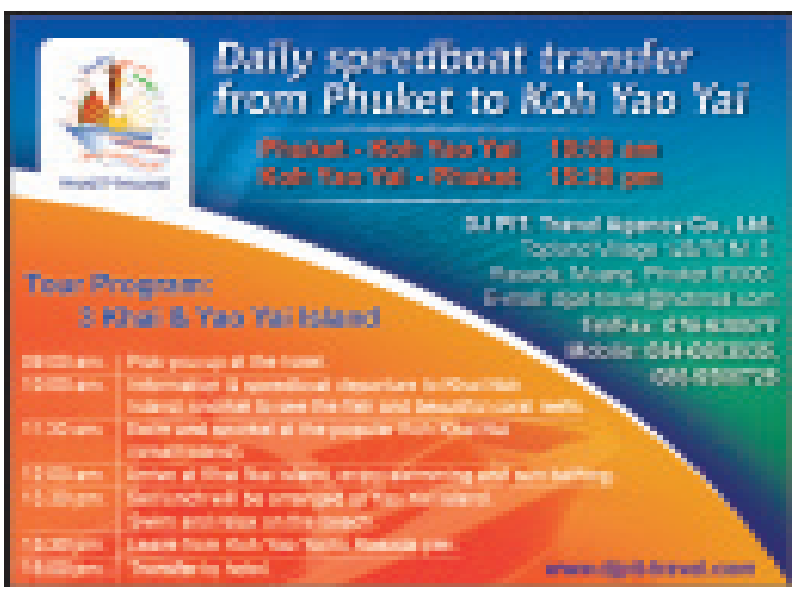
Should you end up in conversation with one of the beach hawkers, within a few seconds you'll find yourself hounded by about half a dozen Balinese, painting a henna tattoo on your left bicep while massaging your hands and cutting you up a coconut and showing off the latest in knockoff sunglasses.

It usually takes no more than three "No thank yous" before they leave you alone. A much quieter beach is the one at Nusa Dua, which hardly anyone apart from the guests at the beachside resorts seems to find. Visit Nusa Dua as early in the day as you can stand because the tide goes right out during the afternoon.

Sanur is another decent beach, albeit geared towards water sports, such as parasailing, jet-skiing and those unsightly banana boats. The swimming isn't great as there is a lot of seaweed and the water isn't clear, but as with Nusa Dua, you won't come across too many people.

Jimbaran is home to a fishing community and so although the beach is pretty, the overpowering smell of fish meant that we didn't stay more than about half an hour. The road is filled with overpriced seafood restaurants aimed at tourists chaperoned by touts earning commissions.

All of these beaches can be reached by motorbike or taxi in less than an hour. A bike should cost about 25,000 rupiah for 24 hours, but everything is open to negotiation, and, much like in Phuket, the heavily touristed areas are filled with locals looking for a quick buck.

Bali is certainly worth visiting and it will take you less than two days to work out which areas the majority of the tourists frequent. Female travelers, particularly those out alone, receive some heckling from the locals, who have worked out how to say "I love you" in a multitude of European and Asian languages. I also caught a pair of boys using their phones to snap pictures of bikini-clad beachgoers.

– Matt Crook