



THE BALI TEMPLE RUN

Temples in Bali share the top spot on the must-visit list with its beaches.

Take a look at some of these architectural marvels that dot the pretty Indonesian island.

TEXT ANURAG MALLICK

The sun was about to set across the cliffs of Uluwatu, the stony headland that gave the place its name. Our guide, Made, explained that *ulu* is 'land's end' or 'head' in Balinese, while *watu* is 'stone'. Perched on a rock at the southwest tip of the peninsula, **Pura Luhur Uluwatu** is a *pura segara* (sea temple) and one of the nine directional temples of Bali protecting the island. We gaped at the waves crashing 230 ft below, unaware that the real spectacle was about to unfold elsewhere.

A short walk led us to an amphitheatre overlooking the dramatic seascape. In the middle, around a sacred lamp, fifty bare-chested performers sat in concentric rings, unperturbed by the hushed conversations of the packed audience. They sat in meditative repose, with cool sandalwood paste smeared on their temples and flowers tucked behind their ears. Sharp at six, chants of *cak ke-cak* stirred the evening air. For the next one hour, we sat open-mouthed in awe at Bali's most fascinating temple ritual.

Facing page: Pura Taman Saraswati is a beautiful water temple in the heart of Ubud.





The Kecak dance, filmed in movies such as *Samsara* and Tarsem Singh's *The Fall*, was an animated retelling of the popular Hindu epic Ramayana. There were no instruments, yet the unbelievable cadence of intonations formed a musical underlay to the dance drama – Sita's abduction by Ravana, Jatayu's valiant aerial fight and Lord Rama bringing Sita back with help of the *vanara sena* (monkey army). Dressed in white, a playful Hanuman posed for selfies before setting fire to 'Lanka'. He kicked balls of hay with reckless abandon, drawing big gasps from the crowd.

We filed out of the arena in a daze, a magical start to our Bali tour. Over dinner at the seaside Matahari restaurant at Jimbaran Beach, we enjoyed more performances with temple dancers and dragon dances. **Tanah Lot**, another famous sea shrine perched on a rocky outcrop amidst crashing waves, was a 45-minute drive from Kuta to Beraban on the west coast.

With over a thousand shrines dotting the 5,600-sq.km island, one needs a plan to take on the Island of the Gods. Our guide, Made, gave us a brief overview of Balinese Hinduism. The supreme all-in-one almighty god is Acintya (the inconceivable) or Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa, composed of the trinity Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

There are four main types of temples in Bali – public temples, village temples, family temples for ancestor worship, and functional temples based on profession. Farmers build a shrine of Devi Sri or goddess of grain in the fields; fishermen consecrate Deva Varuna by the sea. Every village has at least three *puras* (temples) – *pura desa* for Brahma, *pura puseh* for Vishnu and *pura dalem* for Shiva. The Balinese hold sacred the philosophy of *tri kaya parisuda* – correct thinking, telling the truth, doing the right thing – a universal viewpoint about pure and righteous code of conduct.

From the bus, Made pointed out statues of Arjuna, Lord Krishna, and Bhima's son, Ghatotkacha, who fought Karna in the Mahabharata war and is revered by the

This page: The Kecak dance, a retelling of the Ramayana, is a ritual unique to temples in Bali.



M&CTherm-Weise / age fotostock / Dinodia; Anurag Mallick



Clockwise from left: Beautiful stone carvings adorn the walls of Pura Desa Batuan; Balinese boys at Taman Ayun temple; The Pura Gunung Lebah overlooks the confluence where Sage Markandeya meditated.



Balinese as a loyal, intelligent and powerful figure. As a flying knight, he was responsible for the air defense of the Pandavas and is thus believed to provide safe passage to all flights landing in and out of Bali! Driving past the roundabout dominated by the gigantic statue, we slowly climbed to the highlands of Ubud, 400m above sea level.

Grabbing sarongs to be suitably attired for the 15th-century **Pura Desa Batuan**, we learnt about the nuances of Balinese temple architecture. The temple layout is governed by the concept of *tri mandala* or three realms divided by walls – the *nista mandala* or outer courtyard reserved for waiting and performances,

the *madya mandala* or middle realm for religious preparations with drum towers and gamelan pavilions, and *utama mandala*, the most sacred innermost realm.

The main entrance or *candi bentar* was split in two, as if hacked by an unseen giant cleaver. “That is the concept of *rwa bhineda* or maintaining balance between two opposing forces. The left and right halves of the gate denote balance or harmony, a principle that governs our lives. Similarly, the guardian spirits or gatekeepers are clad in checkered black and white cloth,” explained our guide. *Kori agung*, the gate between the *madya mandala* and the innermost compound is an ornate roofed tower. Most *puras* have an *aling aling* or screen wall after

CULTURE

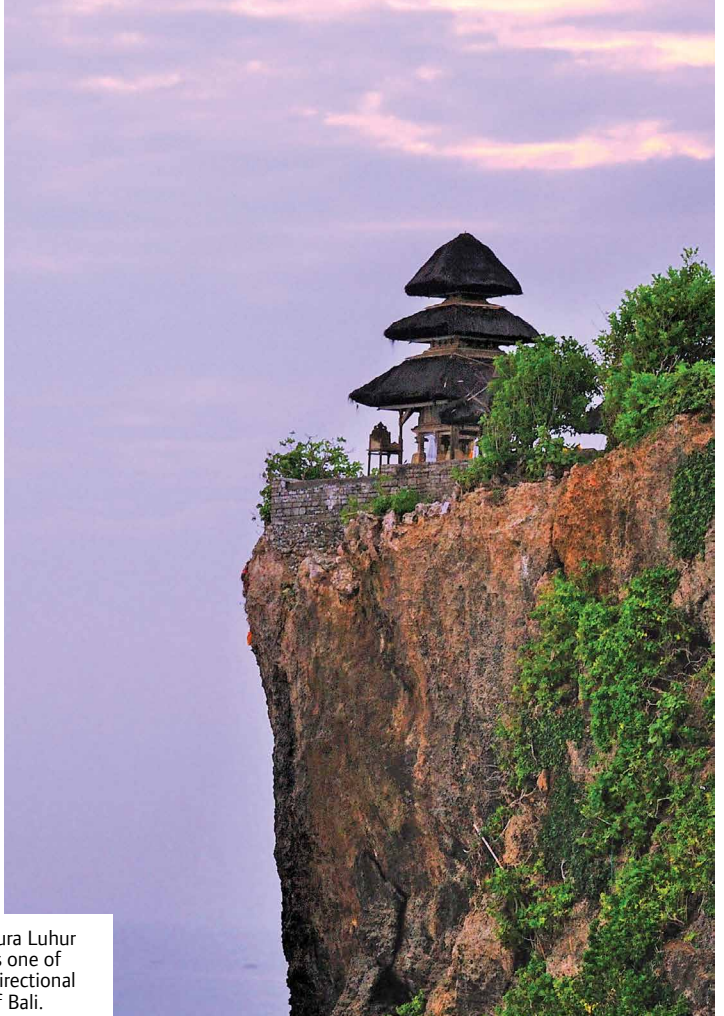


the entrance to fend off negative spirits. (It is believed that spirits travel only in straight lines and thus bounce off this protective wall). After exploring the temple and its various pavilions, we continued to Ubud.

Centuries ago, Hinduism was brought to Bali by Sage Markandeya, who came from India with 800 followers via Java to Mount Agung, the highest mountain in Bali. Here, on the southern slopes, he established the mother temple **Pura Besakih**, the largest and holiest temple on the island. Markandeya arrived at a confluence or 'campuhan' of two rivers. Made continued the legend as we drove past the Sacred Monkey Forest in Ubud and stopped on Jalan Raya for a short walk to **Pura Gunung Lebah**, literally 'temple on a mountain slope'. We halted at the temple steps near the spot where Markandeya supposedly sat in meditation, chanting mantras and asking the sick and diseased to dive into the river. Miraculously cured, they rejoiced and shouted "ubad, ubad" (medicine, medicine) and that's supposedly how the place was named Ubud!

Above: Pura Luhur Uluwatu is one of the nine directional temples of Bali.

Below: Stone statues with colourful capes in the Pura Besakih temple complex.





Left: The scenic Campuhan Ridge hike in Ubud.

Right: A stone figurine at Pura Taman Ayun.



Even today, confluences are considered sacred by the Balinese who come here for purification ceremonies. Westerners come for yoga, Balinese massages, healing courses, and rafting or hikes along Campuhan Ridge.

About a five-minute walk down south, at Ubud Palace, officially Puri Saren Agung, we saw Kala's face as portal guardian on the doorway of the royal shrine. The serene **Pura Taman Saraswati**, a beautiful water temple set near a lovely lotus pond, was a short walk away. The temple is dedicated to the Hindu Goddess Saraswati, the goddess of learning, literature and art.

We drove 8 km southwest of Ubud, where one of Bali's most beautiful temples **Taman Ayun**, literally 'beautiful garden', sits in a serene park of trees and ponds. It is a *pura tirta* (water temple) as well as a *pura kawiten* (family temple), built by the Rajas of Mengwi. Its pagoda-like multi-tiered roof or *meru*, represents the sacred mountain. An ornate sculpture of Lord Vishnu's *vahana* (vehicle) Garuda stands proud, a symbol of Indonesia's emblem and national carrier. It is omnipresent – in shops, the airport and Garuda Wisnu Kencana (GWK) Cultural Park.

Bali comes alive during temple festivals, which are elaborate affairs with ritual baths in rivers or ponds, processions, ceremonies. Every day, outside homes, shops and street corners we spotted locals making offerings or *canang sari*, a small palm-leaf basket with flowers, rice and incense. It's mandatory to include a trio of items to represent the divine trinity – *kattha* (gambier) for Brahma, betel nut for Vishnu, and tobacco and lime for Shiva.

In Bali, there is divinity at every doorstep... ■



Jet Airways operates daily direct flights to Hong Kong from Mumbai and New Delhi. From here, fly with codeshare partner Hong Kong Airlines to Denpasar in Bali.

QUICK FACTS

ACCOMMODATION

Bali has a plethora of accommodation options available from luxury hotels to villas and B&Bs.

Hotel Mercure Bali Legian in Kuta lies a short drive away from the airport and is close to Legian Beach.

If you're looking to stay in Ubud, Viceroy Bali offers thatched villas set on the edge of a steep ravine and stunning views.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit www.balitourismboard.or.id and www.indonesia.travel