

Balinese style

Villas are a popular alternative for visitors to Bali, writes DIANA PLATER

WHenever you visit Bali there's always something new to see, whether it's a grand hotel, restaurant or another shopping complex.

But these days what amazes is that down every twisting lane on any spare bit of land, a new luxury villa has been built.

And there are all sorts to choose from.

Since artist Jim Elliot built the Villas Bali Hotel and Spa in Seminyak in the early 1990s, followed by a villa complex he built for friends who then rented them out, villa building has boomed.

Now hotels have followed the trend, with luxury brands such as the Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons and the Bulgari offering villas (although some say these are really glorified hotel rooms).

There are villa complexes that are investor-owned and centrally managed, or ones managed by the investors themselves that have hotel amenities.

Long-time Bali resident Stephen Michie, who owns Serene Villas, says there are three different types of Australians

travelling to Bali – budget, adventurer/shoppers and stylish.

And Seminyak is the style capital of the island.

"Seminyak is like a little village, less congested than Kuta and Legian and more stylish," he says.

The area has the best boutiques and homeware stores, as well as scores of galleries, restaurants and hip bars.

It's the place to stay in Bali at the moment, especially for the more sophisticated market, he says.

And Michie says villas are perfect for couples, families and groups of friends with children travelling together. They can invite friends over for dinner, using the services of their own chef and butler or concierge, and also have the use of their own private pool.

This, and the extra space can't be duplicated in a hotel and is often less expensive than booking a number of rooms.

Serene Villas at Seminyak is particularly child-friendly, offering babysitting services and fences around the pools. High chairs and car seats are also available.

The nearby Space at Bali is less than a year old and is designed in a Moroccan style, with high roofs, a kitchen, an upstairs relaxation or 'chill' and massage space, a partially outdoor bathroom and large lap pool. Both villas are close to the shopping area and not too far from the beach but very quiet.

'Bali is still doing very well' despite the economic downturn, Michie says.

And for Australians it's a much more reasonable, but still exotic, holiday option than flying to the United States or Europe.

IF YOU GO.....

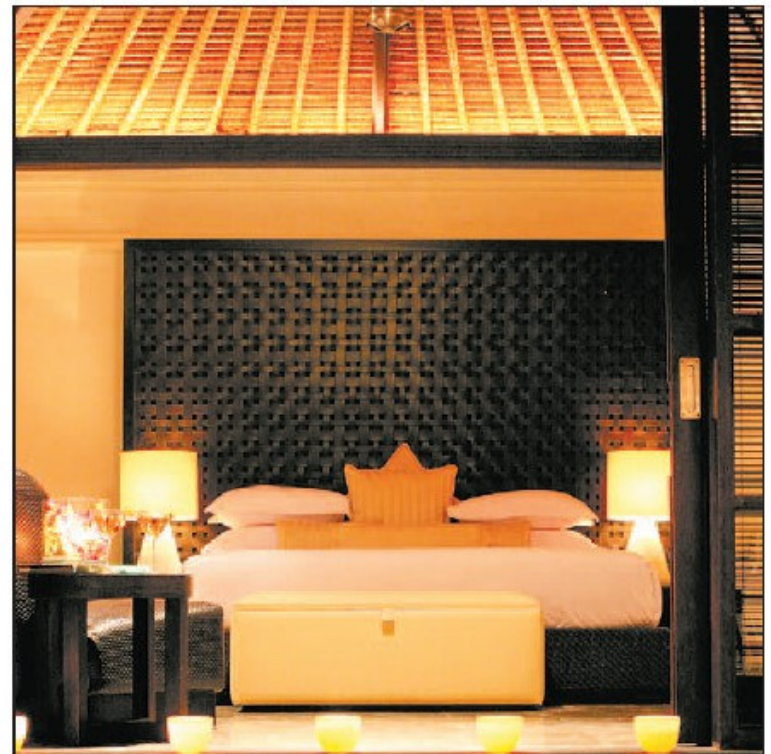
Space at Bali: www.spaceatbali.com.

Serene Villas: www.SereneVilla.com.

A couple of good shops in the area: Widia Duta Bali, Jala Raya Legian no 450, Legian, selling handmade cotton clothes.

Li-Ling Art Gallery in Seminyak makes beautiful handbags from Javanese leather. Bagmaker Mif and his family are from Sulawesi and have been in Seminyak for seven years. Jalan Raya Seminyak No 50.

Jetstar offers a total of 17 flights each week from five Australian cities to Denpasar. Visit Jetstar.com.



Stephen Michie's check list for customers selecting a villa from the web:

1. Decide on your budget.
2. Select your villa size (1, 2, 3 or 4 bedrooms)
3. Surf the web and make a short list of villas that are attractive.
4. Be sure the villa has all the facilities you need.
5. Look carefully at the villa site for extensive details on all aspects of the villa and a professional web site.
6. Read independent villa reviews online (www.tripadvisor.com).
7. Villas that respond quickly and efficiently to customers' emails are likely to be efficient and organised.