



When the going gets tough, Kieren Charteris gets going – to Bali

Serene Seminyak

It's a typical August afternoon at the office. The story I'm writing is past deadline and my boss is getting twitchy. The thunder of rain on the roof fails to drown out the annoyingly carefree laughter of a colleague who's finished her piece for the day. And I still have to pick up the cat from the vet and come up with three courses for a dinner party that night.

I could use a little serenity right now! My gaze alights on the small stone Buddha next to my computer and the harsh realities of the winter Wednesday recede as my mind drifts back to one of the most serene experiences in my life – a two-week holiday in a private villa in Bali.

The dictionary defines "serene" as either "bright and without clouds" or "without worry, stress or disturbance". Bali is both.



Sure, it has a rainy season (October to March) but the downpours come as a relief to the tropical temperatures and pass quickly. And while the bombings two years ago may have shattered the island's peaceful image, they failed to shatter the reality. Time has healed the wounds and the gentle Balinese have returned to a life of peace, prayer and ceremony, just as tourists are returning to "The Island Of The Gods".

Arriving at Ngurah Rai International Airport on Garuda Indonesia's evening flight from Auckland is like landing on the shores of a garden paradise. Most first-time travellers to Bali end up in the thick of Kuta's carnival atmosphere, rubbing shoulders with the package holiday crowd. Others head literally for the hills – to the cultural centre of Ubud and its terraced rice paddies.

But more and more visitors are discovering fashionable Seminyak, just two villages up the beach from Kuta but world's apart in style. Less densely developed and more cosmopolitan, it has some of the best restaurants, nightspots and shopping in Bali. Renting villas is the thing there and we were lucky enough to be recommended one of the best – the aptly named Serene Garden Villa.

Moored in a sea of rice paddies, the walled three-bedroom villa is the perfect oasis for holidaymakers seeking, well, serenity. Simple white walls and contemporary furniture in neutral tones set off traditional *alang-alang* (thatched) roofing and a range of Balinese artworks. The plush sofa running the length of the open-sided living room became a favourite spot to sip duty-free cocktails while enjoying the balmy evening air, the chirping of crickets in the garden and the play of the garden lights on the surface of the dark-tiled pool.

The tranquil mood continues in the three double bedrooms, each of which is decorated in a different colour – magenta, orange or blue. The ensuite of my downstairs room (the magenta one) was open to the sky so it seemed like I was showering under soft rain. I could feel the stress washing away.

We woke each morning to a fresh pot of Balinese coffee, toast and tropical fruit platter on the deck by the pool. Daylight revealed the landscaped garden of brilliant flowers, flamboyant trees and ginger plants in all its verdant glory.

A row of banana loungers beckoned the sun worshippers. The dappled shade of the bale (pool house) offered a welcome refuge when the heat became too intense. Vivid butterflies flitted among the dark green leaves and creamy blossoms of the gnarled frangipani trees and iridescent dragonflies hovered above the sparkling pool.

Like most, the villa comes with cook, housekeeper and gardener. If you want to dine in, all you have to do is give Dickie the cook a few hours' warning and some grocery money. We invited friends over for a delicious three-course meal for not much more than \$10 a head (although wine is expensive). The pleasant atmosphere as we ate and drank by flickering candlelight with the scent of frangipani wafting in from the garden was priceless.

Serene Garden Villa is equipped with a TV, DVD, stereo and a small library of paperbacks. With an iPod to pump familiar tunes through the stereo, it quickly became our home away from home. But however lovely it may be, a villa is always still a staging ground for forays into town. Seminyak seems to operate under an

adaptation of that old Zen adage about a tree falling in the forest: if you stay in a villa and no one knows it, did you really visit Seminyak at all?

So we squelched through the rice paddies to loll on nearby Seminyak Beach. It would have been quicker and less muddy to go via the road – but where's the adventure in that? Our favourite eatery was Ku De Ta, where the expatriate cognoscenti congregates each evening to watch the sun plunge into the Bali Strait in a blaze of orange glory. It truly was the good life!

All too soon our two weeks were up. We were however able to bring back some mementos. I chose my stone Buddha from the wide range of locally made artworks and furnishings at the same store that decorated our villa, also called Serene. But for serious shopping, Sourcing Bali are the experts. Their personal shopping team know where the best buys are found – and take you there in an air-conditioned minivan. I never would have found my framed Hindu bride and groom figurines if it wasn't for them.

And if it wasn't for Australian chef Janet De Neefe, I wouldn't be able to tell a galangal root from plain old ginger. It's bigger and less knobbly apparently.

Janet passes on her culinary skills to students from all over the world at the Casa Luna cooking school in Ubud. Surrounded by a haze of coconut oil, we smelled and tasted piles of aromatic rhizomes, sun-bleached seeds and waxy nuts as her staff prepared an Indonesian feast. A takeaway spice guide and recipe book allows you to fill your house back in New Zealand with the aroma of ginger and lemongrass and taste the flavours of paradise once again.

I'm salivating at the memory when my boss interrupts my reverie. "Kieren!" she yells from her office. "Stop daydreaming and write that bloody story!" Now where's that travel agent's number...?

Factfile

- For Serene Garden Villa, phone 62 361 738 611, fax 62 361 730 865, email info@serenevilla.com, or book online at www.serenevilla.com
- Garuda Indonesia flies from Auckland to Bali twice a week via Brisbane. Fares start from \$1299 plus taxes. For bookings and more information contact: Garuda Orient Holidays, phone (09) 366 1457, toll-free 0508 650 014, email goak@goh.co.nz. They can also book Sourcing Bali shopping tours and Casa Luna cooking classes. Or check out www.sourcing-bali.com and www.casalunabali.com



The orange master bedroom



Our 'shortcut' to the beach



Grinding spices is hard work!