



Welcome to Acacia, your private garden villa.

In Balinese HEAVEN

PRASANNA RAMAN soaks in the luxurious comfort of a stay in one of Bali's villa resorts.

WHEN the villa manager of Serene Villas, Wayan Gawe opened the main entrance to the private villa I was to spend the next three days in, my first thoughts were that this has to be paradise.

With a Balinese bale (day bed), and a beautiful private pool all to myself in an open garden, I knew instantly the meaning of postcard picture perfect.

And paradise it certainly was, and to think only 30 minutes ago, I had disembarked at Indonesia's Denpasar airport.

Yes, I was in Bali, a much-favoured holiday destination in this part of the world offering holidaymakers some of the most scenic and beautiful beaches.

As Nyomen Sukarsa, the butler on hand to serve me during my stay, took my luggage to my room and quickly moved into the kitchen to prepare a welcome drink, I was still soaking in the beauty of the villa and its surroundings while Gawe explained the facilities the villa had to offer.

As he spoke, I thought what a wonderful place this would be to either have a romantic getaway, or a wonderful holiday with the family. "Your drink ma'am," Sukarsa's voice interrupted my thoughts, while Gawe went on to describe how a personal butler would be assigned to prepare my meals and look into my requests.

How cool, a butler to call my own! Although he wasn't the typical, stiff-upper lip bloke typecasted as butlers, Sukarsa's constant bowing made me wonder if he had any ancestral link to Japan.

Among the amenities that I had the pleasure to enjoy in my villa were the private pool, internet and WiFi access, the use of the kitchen, and the DVD movie library. And of course, not forgetting the spa — what would Bali be without its Balinese spa?

Showing me around, Gawe highlighted how the villas are built in an open garden environment, typical of a Balinese home.

The villa I stayed in, called Acacia, had two well-decorated bedrooms, each with its own entrance opening into the garden.

The air-conditioned bedroom was a welcome respite from the warm weather.

The room's best feature had to be the connecting bathroom, which opens up to another small garden within. Fitted with a raindrop shower head, I couldn't wait to try out the shower which promised a shower unlike any other.

However, taking a bath in a bathroom out in the open garden takes some getting used to, and is certainly not for the shy. Needless to say, my shower was a hasty one.

"This is chicken on pineapple skewers, ma'am," said Swarsa as he offered me the starters to my lunch.

Pineapples and paradise. Ah, how they go hand in hand, I thought, as I bit into the juicy grilled fruit. The main dish, grilled chicken on a bed of mashed potatoes, soon followed. I had to stop short of dessert and coffee — I was so full, I didn't want to doze off and miss what the place had to offer.

I was escorted again by Gawe

ADVERTISEMENTS



The trendy bedroom with an open garden in the back.



Space Villas - holiday with a touch of Morocco.



Stephen Michie, a pioneer of the villa concept in Bali.

to view Serene Villas' sister accommodation nearby.

First was Space, located within walking distance from Serene Villas. It's the latest in the stable of villas operated by Stephen Michie, who is Serene Villas' owner. The Moroccan influence is very apparent from its choice of colours and interior decor.

Beautifully-decorated rooms and lounges give its guests the feel of home comforts.

Once again, private pools are a big feature in these villas.

Next on the tour was Abadi Villas, also another set of villas with a touch of Bali. The butler service is available in all the villas.

With prices ranging from US\$150 (RM483) for a single bedroom villa to US\$500 per night for four-bedroom villas, they offer the exclusivity that many hotel rooms don't.

"Unlike your regular hotel stay with only a bedroom and a big pool to share with other hotel guests, our villas offer guests the privacy and comfort they can't find elsewhere. Who wouldn't want to be pampered by a personal butler, have your own garden and pool to enjoy, all at the price of staying at a good hotel," said Michie, who is among the pioneers in bringing the villa concept to Bali.

He first bought a holiday villa here to spend his holidays. Word got around among his friends that he had a villa in Bali's district of Seminyak, and one by one, requests to use his villa were made.

Soon after, he thought it would be a good idea to rent out his villa to holiday makers, and that is how he ended up owning eight villas in Serene Villas.

"It was a classic case of organic growth," said Michie, describing

Korean and Italian are among the cuisines butlers are trained to cook.

The villas have guests almost all year round.

"Previously, Bali had distinct high and low peak seasons. But now we have a 70 per cent occupancy rate throughout the year.

"From March to May, we see many Indian tourists in Bali, and lately there's an influx of Korean honeymooners who come in November," said Michie.

Frequent guests are from Australia, New Zealand and Japan, with December and January remaining the holiday season with full occupancy rates.

As we finished our light banter over cocktails and smoked salmon *hors d'oeuvres*, Michie left me in the hands of Manori Spa's masseuse, who gave me a tension relief aromatherapy therapeutic massage.

As she finished, I thought that taking a dip in my very own swimming pool would be a wonderful finish to my first-ever spa experience, before dozing off

and then taking a shower.

If such basic pampering was blissful, imagine how much more heavenly a four-hands massage, traditional Balinese *Boreh* body wrap, Royal Javanese *Mandi Lulur* (body scrub), relaxing mineral Flores Island Sea Mud scrub, or hair and scalp massage would be.

As dinner time approached, I decided to dine out, an option that many villa guests, said Michie, tend to enjoy.

Within walking distance is Jalan Laksmana, better known as Restaurant Road, which has rows of restaurants serving cuisine ranging from Italian to Greek food.

Souvenir shops also dot the road and the ones opposite. From bracelets to bedspreads, everything Balinese is sold here.

"When you're done with dinner, don't walk back alone. It's easy to get a taxi back here," suggested Made Dharma, the driver-cum-tour guide at Serene Villas.

That's another option that the villas offer its guests: half-day

tours to a full day of sightseeing.

Whether it's the Kintamani Volcano, Elephant Cave, Monkey Forest, Uluwatu Temple, Kecak Cultural dance performance or Denpasar market shopping tour, guests can be sure of interesting places to visit.

On my second day, Dharma drove me to Ubud, some one and a half hours' away, for a shopping and sightseeing tour.

As he watched me shop, Dharma suggested that I come back again to Bali for a holiday with my family.

As I packed my bags to leave the next day, I can only say that the aptly named Serene Villas and its other villas is definitely the place to head to for some tranquillity when holidaying in Bali.

For more details, visit www.serenevilla.com, www.spaceatbali.com and www.abadivillas.com

■ pras@nst.com.my

Note: The writer's trip to the villas was courtesy of Serene Villas.



Attending nature's call in nature — the open garden bathroom.



Blue skies and a beautiful pool for a tranquil holiday.