

Sea Side of Seminyak

It May Not Be Ibiza, But With Its Burgeoning Dining, Art, And Nightlife Scene, The Once-Sleepy Seaside Village Of Seminyak Has All The makings Of Tropical Asia's Most Vibrant Resort Enclave

By : Jamie James

A When I first moved to Bali, in 1999, I signed a one-year lease on a cheerful two-room house with a big garden in Seminyak, the "nice" part of Kuta. In those days, the place was still pretty funky. When I knocked off work at sundown, I would grab a big bottle of Bintang beer (wine was virtually unobtainable back then) and pedal my bicycle down to Jalan Oberoi to unwind by watching the sun settle over the rice fields. Glittering green paddy extended in a patchwork down to the shore road, marked off by rows of coconut palms that swayed in the perpetually purling ocean breeze. The road was a Mess but there wasn't much traffic. There were a couple of restaurants, a few stands selling sarongs and rattan placemats, but the mood was rustic, relaxed - imbued with the magical essence known as "the real Bali."

Nowadays that house is advertised as a villa, and the poky little village of Seminyak has become the site of tropical Asia's first tourism boom in the 21st century. Unlike previous Bali booms, the lure isn't the island's fabled culture, or the romantic beaches, but the promise of glittering nightlife and sophisticated.

Shopping and dining

In seven years we've gone from Nescafe to cappuccino; even humble warungs offer a martini menu. Jalan Oberoi (officially, Jalan Laksmana) is lined with galleries, boutiques, and restaurants, cheek by jowl all the way to the beach.

Traffic can be hectic in high season, but one thing remains unchanged-the road is still a mess. Yet even that is a sign of progress: from early morning till dusk, big trucks rumble along loaded with limestone, sand, and lumber, raw materials for more resorts, more shops, more swanky private villas.

In the 1960s and '70s, when foreign visitors began arriving in Bali in serious numbers, the beaten path led father south, to Kuta, where surfers, hippies, and other scruffy young vagabonds were seriously partying; the farther north you went, the quieter and more secluded it was. Then, in 1978, the Oberoi hotel group opened the first luxury resort in Bali, choosing a location in Seminyak, on the same breathtaking coastline as Kuta but well away from its honkytonks and budget hostels-far enough out, they hoped, that no one would ever build near them.

The Oberoi was at the end of an unlighted dirt track-almost impassable for mud seven it rained-that had no name until people started calling it Jalan Oberoi. The new resort flourished in remote, solitary majesty until 1993, when a stylish international restaurant, La Lucciola, opened further up the beach near Pura Petitenget, one of the island's most important temples. A few years later came the debut of The Legian, a quasi-Mogul palace that has matured to become Bali's grand hotel.

With the opening of the ultra-stylish haut-Aussie playhouse Ku De Ta, right next to the Oberoi, in 2000, modern Seminyak was born. In 2004, the international travel press discovered it. A major story in the New York Times- the ultimate proof that leisure destination has established itself in the world market place-rhapsodized about the 'high-end gloss' it discovered here: fancy restaurants, first-class spas, and hip nightclubs have all cropped up in the last year, adding new spice to a scene that, not long ago, bordered on Stale. "Departures the magazine for American Express Platinum cardholders, declared, 'The scene has become so stylish that Seminyak has been dubbed the Ibiza of Southeast Asia.'"

Residents of Bali, if they had ever visited madly chic Ibiza, might have been excused for scratching their heads in perplexity. Resemblances between Spain's glamorous, frenetic island resorting lazy ol' Seminyak exist, but the differences are more pronounced: for one thing, as any loyal Seminyak will tell you, we've got the better beach here, hands and bare feet down. For another, options for accommodations comprise not only luxury resorts and fabulous seaside villas, but also comfortable budget bungalows for 30 bucks a night, a short stroll from the beach.

Yet there's no doubt that in the past seven years Seminyak has become a substantially different place: indeed there's nothing quite like it in Asia. As in Ibiza, the rich and famous may be glimpsed coming and going, but for them Seminyak's main attraction is that they can escape the crowds. The principal fallacy in comparisons between Bali's chic new enclave and swish Mediterranean resorts like Ibiza is that even when it's fully booked, Seminyak is not unpleasantly jammed; the tour buses still herd the masses to Kuta and points further south to Tuban, Jimbaran, Nusa Dua.

Even if visitors to Seminyak nowadays are well grounded and well heeled, and they drink mango martinis and metropolitans instead of local beer and arak, it's still Bali-slow and relaxed, delightfully out of it. The islands of the Indonesian archipelago are something of a buzz-free zone, which makes the success of establishing Seminyak as a fashionable brand all the more remarkable. Among the leading cheerleaders for the area's dramatic repositioning in the travel marketplace has been The Yak, an oversized glossy magazine that features thongs and big jewelry over serene sunrises. "Some people come to Bali for the culture, some come for the cocktails says British-born Sophie Digby, one of the magazine's editors. "seminyak is for party people."

Digby is simply putting spin on the old paradigm of tourism in Bali that serious culture vultures headed for the hills, to Ubud, while louche lotus-eaters congregated in the sunny south. The sudden rise of Seminyak has turned the stereotype on its head: there's a lot going on here now besides sex, sunshine, and surf. When New York art dealer Richard Meyer moved to Bali five years ago to open a photography gallery, he chose Seminyak over Sanur and Ubud, the traditional centers of the Bali art scene since the first invasion by foreign travelers in the 1930s. "I chose Seminyak because it has a feeling of venturesomeness," Meyer says. "it's a younger crowd more stimulating. There's nothing stimulating about Ubud now. it's become decoration.

Richard Meyer Culture, as he calls his gallery, began by exhibiting vintage vernacular photography from throughout the archipelago: portraits of country folk from Sumatra, commercial photography from hip Jakarta in the Sukarno era, ancient family snapshots from Bali. Last year, he began showing contemporary work, mounting a series of portraits by Bali's most famous foreign resident, landscape designer and author Made Wijaya (aka Michael White, of Sydney).

In February, Meyer exhibited a show of male nudes by Rama Surya, an internationally acclaimed photo journalist from Sumatra. In one series of photographs, the artist's young sons romp in the garden, looking more like benign fairies than human children; in another a famous yogi demonstrates advanced poses-naked, in a sculpture park in east Bali. Mostly Muslim Indonesia, as a nation, is more puritanical than Hindu Bali, where group bathing is a venerable tradition; there was some fear that the exhibition might stir up a controversy, as the national assembly in Jakarta considers a bill to define pornography in much more stringent terms, making it virtually synonymous with nudity. Meyer says, 'I invited the police and the village leaders, and gave them colas and let them have a look. They didn't have a problem !.

Rio Helmi, perhaps the most successful photographer based in Bali, has long operated a gallery in Ubud. Last year he opened a storefront space on Seminyak's main drag, to get away from what he calls "the art mafia of Ubud." He chose Seminyak, he says, "because there's much more happening down here, a lot of energy for new things." Helmi is candid about choosing the location for the volume of tourist traffic: his main motive in opening here was to sell his own striking photographs of Bali and the world beyond. But he also plans to hang two to three shows a year featuring other Indonesian photographers; the first in the series will be an exhibition of work by Eddy Hasbi.

The newest art gallery in Seminyak is a tiny chocolate-box of a space called Casa Iseabo, on Jalan Laksmana, just down the road from the Oberoi and Ku De Ta. The owner, Susana Archibald, an effervescent blonde with the freckles and sunny disposition of an Aussie in the tropics, had her heart set on opening her gallery there.

"This is the location" she recalls enthusiastically. "If I hadn't found a place here, I wouldn't have opened the gallery. The street has a nice village-y feel. I love the trees it's like a little boulevard."

Archibald's first exhibition was a selection of expressionistic sculptures hewn from limestone blocks, by the legendary Balinese artist I Bunyan Cemul. At 78, he is one of the last links to the golden age of visual arts in Bali; the Pita Maha group founded in Ubud in the 1930s by European artists such as Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet, and their princely patron? Cokorde Gede Agung Sukawati. Cemul was also present at the creation of modern Seminyak: at the entrance to the Oberoi, under the boughs of a mighty banyan tree, stand a pair of Cemul's comically fearsome figurers wrapped in black-and-white checked poleng cloths-gargoyles standing guard at the junction of Bali's past and future.

According to Made Wijaya an enthusiastic student and storyteller of the island's history, the origin of Seminyak came some 500 years ago, when a holy sage from Java named Dang Hyang Dwijendra landed his bark on what is now Seminyak Beach. There, on a propitious spot next to a freshwater estuary, he built Pura Petitenget, which remains one of the most powerful and influential temples in Bali. On the holiday of Melasti, thousands of people from 50 or more villages in the surrounding area bring sacred objects to Pura Petitenget to bathe them in the sea.

Wijaya says that Petitenget has always had a reputation for eeriness: in Balinese, peti is a betel-nutbox, traditionally the repository of a Hindu holyman's powers and tenget means "spooky." "The temple was famous for a particularly fearsome form of the Barong," he says, referring to one of Bali's most revered dance dramas. "From the beginning, Seminyak was wilder-it had a wild coastline, a wild spooky temple, and its people were the wild ones, the

high rollers." Since the '70s, this part of Bali has been a favored residential area for expat artists and designers. There are many board shorts-to-riches tales about the creative inhabitants tucked away in Seminyak's alleyways. The first to stake out a place on the shore was Emilio Migliavacca, an Italian designer who markets his brilliantly colored floral-print creations as Milo. He built an eccentric, turreted dream house at the end of modern Jalan Dhyanaपुरa that remains one of the most imaginative expressions of the expat fantasy life in Bali. Many of the island's best-known design houses began in the Legian-Seminyak area, including Paul Ropp and Biasa. Seminyak has also benefited by being out in front of the Great Asian spa boom. Traditionally, in Bali as throughout the region, massage was mostly therapeutic in purpose, performed in settings so basic that they verged on squalor. Then the concept of a luxury spa started to catch on, in the beginning in association with five-star hotels; the first in Bali was the Mandara at the Chedi (now the Alila), near Ubud.

Soon there was a wide choice of establishments offering an experience that was aesthetically pleasing as much as healing, at affordable prices. Susan Stein, who has created many spas throughout Asia, now runs a massage business called Jari Menari ("Dancing Fingers"), at rates midway between those of the fancy hotel spas and the old ladies who pinch sunbathing foreigners on Kuta Beach. Stein explains, "Massage should be a necessity, not a luxury."

From its early, spooky days, Seminyak has also been a favorite haunt of gay people, a legacy that stands behind the emergence of Indonesia's first gay party town another point of resemblance to Ibiza and other chic Mediterranean resorts. Several gay clubs and bars have come and gone in Indonesia over the years, cropping up here and there with varying degrees of openness (notably the Hulu cafe, a funky beer club with drag show on Jalan Padma in Kuta). But the scene along Jalan Dhyanaपुरa is the country's first reasonable approximation of a gay pub crawl.

Two nightclubs, Q Bar and Kudos, are the anchors, with late-night shows and dancing. They have attracted a constellation of gap owned shops and restaurants to Dhyanaपुरa, which cater to the same market. Liquid, an established discotheque a few doors down from Q Bar, recently changed its name to Kwin (pronounced "Queen" in Indonesian) and reopened as a gay venue, a move intended to boost business. The scene here is exuberant and open, yet it lacks the tired naughtiness of Thailand's tacky gay resorts.

The crowds are mixed in every way, in terms of age, nationality, and sexual preference; many young Japanese women visitors come to the gay clubs on Dhyanaपुरa to ogle the lads. More significant even than its growing market share is gay Seminyak's new sense of community. The most visible manifestation of this came in March, when Bali sent its first-ever contingent to the Gay Mardi Gras in Sydney. A week before the parade, a fund-raising benefit was held in Seminyak at Waroeng Bonita, a garden restaurant on Jalan Petitenget. Partiers mingled under the candlelit frangipani trees, amid the aromas of a sizzling barbecue; in the pavilion, dancers in glittery, feathered costumes performed routines ranging from belly dancing to sexy Vegas-style numbers. The restaurant's owner and host, the eponymous Bonita, swirled and sashayed through the crowds in his signature Audrey Hepburn-style picture hat, keeping the mood carefree. At midnight, the revelers were transported by vans bedecked with rainbow bunting to Kudos and Q Bar, where the party continued into the wee hours. You might almost have thought you were in Ibiza.

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