

# Tropical sanctuary

Serene Villas makes an idyllic base for a great Bali experience. **By Jacqueline Toyad**



It does not take very long to unwind and settle into holiday mode in Bali. It is as if the island's air consists of essences of relaxation, a few inhalations of which enable one to exhale life's stresses.

"It's the people", most visitors to Bali tell you by way of explaining what makes it one of the world's top destinations.

A hospitality trend that has emerged from this Indonesian island is the private villa — a home away from home. The hallmarks of a Balinese private villa are open-air living, private gardens and pool areas, and, of course, amazing service 24 hours a day.

While the most luxurious of the lot can be found south of the island in Nusa Dua — the renowned enclave of five-star resorts — some of the most stylish can be found in Seminyak, a suburb north of Kuta and Legian (two popular surf spots) on the west coast.

The popularity of private villas was sparked by Australian artist Jim Elliott, who built Villas Bali Hotel & Spa in Seminyak in the early 1990s and then built a villa complex for friends who started renting them out. Since then, Seminyak, once known for its lush padi fields, has seen a proliferation of villas of various concepts.

Serene Villas, built more than 10 years ago, is an amazing sanctuary from the charming mess of Seminyak, which is a little chaotic with bustling narrow streets and endless rows of shops that offer anything from handmade jewellery and designer wear to pirated DVDs and laundry services interspersed with money changers, banks and the odd abandoned lot.

With only a small sign that humbly says "Serene Villas" at the entrance, it is a little difficult to spot the villa complex from the street. No grand statement, just a whitewashed wall and a long, narrow

brick road that seems to go on forever.

My partner and I hardly know what to expect as the driver from Serene Villas who fetched us from the airport takes us down the road. All we see are whitewashed walls and wooden doors with signs that say "Frangipani", "Hibiscus", "Lotus" — names of the villas within the property.

We stop at "Acacia". The door is wide open and our butler ushers us into our very own Eden, "home" for the next few days. There are two bedrooms, each with an en-suite open-air bathroom. Shy folks need not worry — the walls are pretty high with lush tropical foliage for extra coverage. The bathroom door can be locked from within too.

The living area — a lounge-cum-dining room — opens out to the garden with frangipani trees and palms, a pool and a large cabana to laze about in.

It never gets too warm in the villa no matter what time of day it is as the garden helps to cool it down and the open spaces are equipped with ceiling fans. There is also a fully equipped kitchen (in which your butler prepares breakfast hot off the stove in the morning) and a mini-bar with beer glasses and champagne flutes already chilling in the freezer.

Check-in takes place in your living room and your only worry after that is deciding whether to take a dip in the pool first or head out and explore Seminyak.

Once the butler leaves and the main door is shut, it is very easy to think that you are completely alone and so easy to forget that you are smack dab in the middle of bustling Seminyak. There is not even the slightest hint of traffic, just the shushing of palm trees and the gentle roar of the sea coming from beyond the wall.

Already, Serene Villas' promise of privacy and tran-



**Top: Serene Villas feature an amazing organic integration of nature and living space, a great alternative to the four-walled, air-conditioned hotel room anytime**

**Above: Mountain biking through Ubud and other adventures are easily accessible**

quillity is felt. You go from "stressed out by work" mode to "relaxed and on holiday" mode in 0.5 second.

What is dangerous about such a setting is that you may not leave your villa at all. Apart from having a butler at your beck and call — just a phone call away — your living room comes equipped with a DVD player and a digital media player with an amazing library of the latest movies. There is also a stereo sound system, so you will be able to rock it out with your favourite CDs or tunes from your iPod. The cabana, which takes its design cue from the living room decks of a traditional Balinese home, is the perfect place to lose