

## CULTURE FIX

*Mark Andrews visits Ubud, where dance, temples and good Balinese food inspire him.*

PICTURES: MARK ANDREWS



**'D**o you need transport?' reads the sign held up high by the Balinese spruiker as I leave my hotel. I shake my head and he turns the sign around. On the back, it pleadingly reads 'Maybe for tomorrow?'

Meanwhile, a Balinese long-tailed macaque picks through one of today's offerings before hurling it to the ground in a show of disapproval. Welcome to another morning on Ubud's Monkey Forest Road.

While it is easy to eat, pray, love in Bali, there are also rewards from exploring the island's cultural side. And there is no better place to do this than from Ubud.

It is still possible to visit Ketut Liyer – the Balinese medicine man who set Elizabeth Gilbert on her year-long odyssey depicted in the movie *Eat Pray Love* – for a palm reading. However, it doesn't take an encounter with a fortune teller to feel the mystical side of Bali.

With 90 per cent of islanders practising Hinduism blended with animist beliefs, offerings are an important part of daily life. Usually consisting of

little more than a small plaited palm-leaf box, they are filled with food, and they waft the fragrance of incense and frangipani flowers.

Put out at regular intervals throughout the day to appease the gods, they line the uneven pavements that are cracked and broken.

Nights resonate with the haunting sounds of *gamelan* orchestras punctuated by the giant



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”



Ubud moments ... the *barong* dance at Batubulan; a basket with red chillies at the Ubud produce market; a terraced rice field fringed by palm trees.

croaks of tiny frogs on lily pads. Balinese dance has its origins in the temples and local story telling, but these days there are regular tourist performances.

*Legong* dances, performed by two young women to the rhythmic percussion of the *gamelan*, involve intricate hand movements and swaying heads invoking the very essence of Balinese femininity.

The *barong* dance is best seen in a temple setting and represents the triumph of good over evil. Back stage in Batubulan village, the performers are relaxed as they busily apply make-up. Village folklore values balance and the dance is seen as a way of fighting black magic to restore equilibrium. Rangda is the evil witch of the forest and it is up to the *barong*, a lion-like creature, to thwart her scheming ways. At the beginning of the show, he comes on to the stage with his monkey friend and the action is interlaced with sensuous Balinese dancers.

Religion permeates the societal fabric and so it should come as no surprise that you are never far from a temple.

A constant stream of Hindu devotees come to Pura Tirta Empul (Temple of Holy Waters) to make offerings, followed by ablutions in the waters fed by a sacred spring – said to have been created by the god Indra – in a pilgrimage that has been going on for more than a millennium.

At Paon Bali (Bali Kitchen), husband and wife team Wayan and Puspa, invite you into their home and introduce typical Balinese ➤





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**On the streets ... (from left) a basket filled with offerings; a seller at Ubud market; a Balinese artisan sculpting a stone statue; chicken sate and fish being cooked in banana leaves on a charcoal grill.**

family life. As for many locals, the day starts at the Ubud market where Pupsa introduces us to ingredients and picks up a few supplies that the couple don't grow in their kitchen garden.

Just before we don aprons, there is time to introduce how families make coconut oil, the cooking oil of choice.

Then it is time to get cooking. First on the list is *base gede* (basic yellow sauce). Pupsa explains that this is the one thing you have to get right to create good Balinese food. It consists of galangal, ginger, turmeric, chillies and various other spices. After the ingredients are finally chopped, it's time for us to pound them into a paste in a huge black mortar. Finally, it is sauteed.

Soon, it is being used in *sate siap*, which unlike regular Indonesian-style sate uses minced chicken, *be siap mesanten* (chicken in coconut curry), *pepesan be pasih* (steamed fish in banana leaves), and *jukut urab* (coconut and snake bean salad). ➤



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A taste of Bali ... a dessert of boiled banana in palm sugar syrup, cooked at Paon Bali cooking school; a macaque at the Sacred Monkey Forest.

After a few hours of chopping, frying and steaming, we finish our food. Each dish is redolent with a complexity of flavours that is missing in most restaurants. Pupsa really knows how to get the tastes of Bali to dance off the plate. ■



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**NEED TO KNOW**

**STAYING THERE** Wapa di Ume ([wapadiume.com](http://wapadiume.com)) from PGK630 a night; Komaneka ([komaneka.com](http://komaneka.com)) from PGK765.

**COOKING THERE** Paon Bali ([paon-bali.com](http://paon-bali.com)) cooking classes start from about PGK79.

**DANCE SHOWS** Barong dances are held daily at 9.30am at Batubulan village. Tickets about PGK22.

**GETTING THERE** Ubud is about an hour's drive from the international airport at Denpasar.

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