

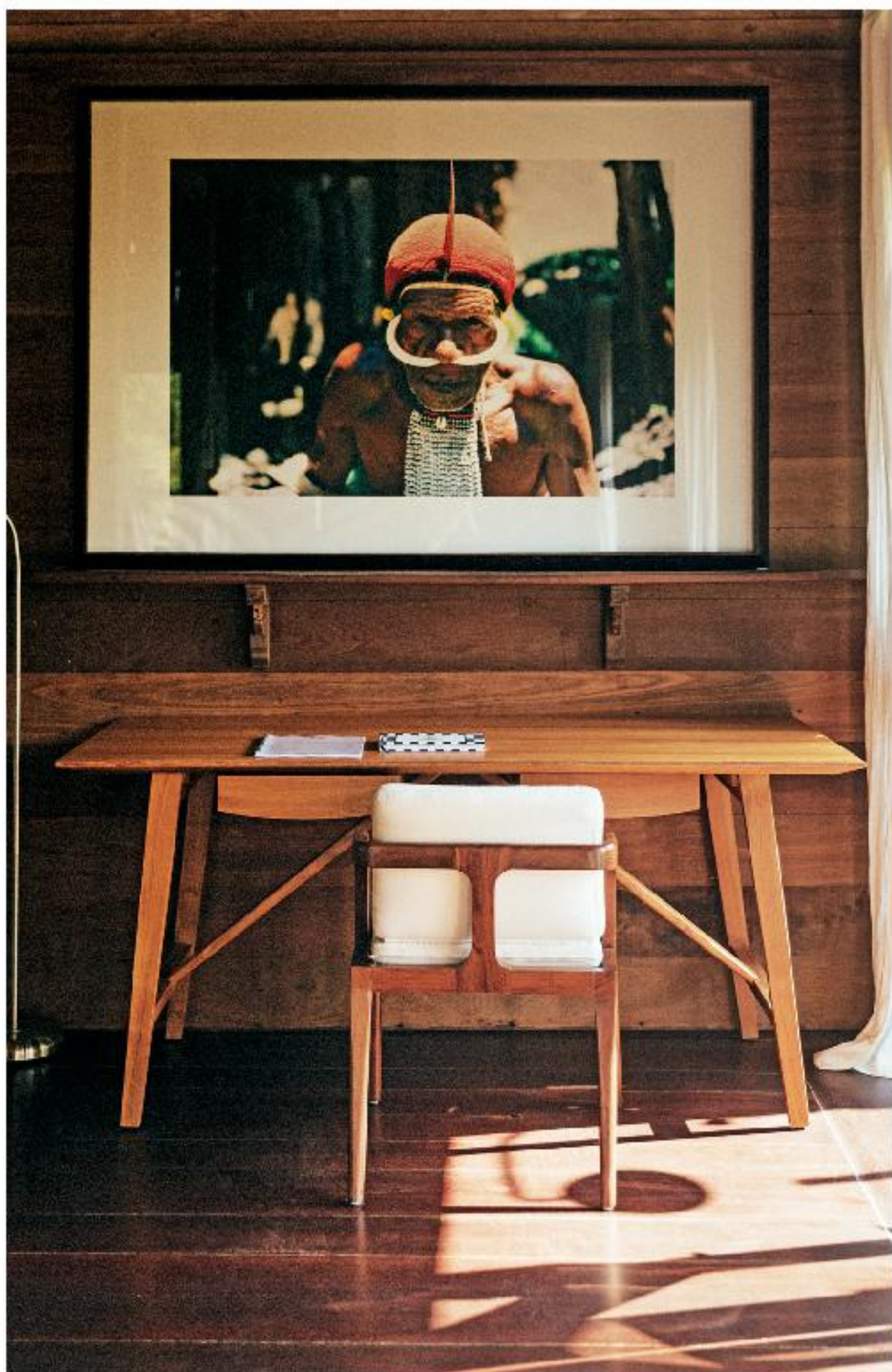


SPLIT DECISION

NO LONGER A SLEEPY ARTISTS' VILLAGE, UBUD IS NOW A CRUSH OF SCOOTERS, SOUND HEALERS AND ZEN SEEKERS. YET ITS SURROUNDINGS REMAIN TINGED IN AN EMERALD SHEEN

BY ANTONIA QUIRKE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACK JOHNS & OWEN TOZER







BREAKFAST IN UBUD, THROUGH A RAINBOW-WASH of spring rain. All the temples and cafés stripped-back and steaming, all the town's dogs wading about with hair slicked like otters. The moment it stops, instantaneous renewal. Sun swelling out the streets with light. Little pale lizards darting from wet stone to wet stone. Tables on pavements being reset with iced coffees sweetened by a dash of condensed milk. All cleansings, rebirths – all supremely Ubud, the town in the high heart of Bali known for its landscape of voluptuous foliage. Sacred waters. Artists, healers, river valleys. Pools with an impossibly perfect pH.

As I wait for my ride at noon beside a crossing along Jalan Hanoman street, all life is turned fantastically outward in a town that feels like an intricate temple site. Everybody living and moving amongst the courtyards and platforms, pavilions and antechambers at a perpetual catch-up. An international picnic. Always, the smell of cooking pork. Squabbling, golden children demanding the satay being griddled on byres along pavements, unwrapping rice in banana leaves like presents, and triumphantly scooping peanut sauce toasted with chillies out of oily bowls. A couple of Catalans carrying wriggling newborns and tree-rubber yoga mats hover at the junction, talking about the Costa Daurada. Hipsters suck on herb-spiked matchas, wearing rough beanies like Steve McQueen in *Papillon*. Exquisite Swedish teenagers with plump skin baked the colour of raspberry rummage in bum bags for change. A busker attempts John Coltrane for a woman in mismatched shoes

who might have just walked out on her life with one suitcase. Jet-lagged models. Stabs of red hibiscus.

Someone born here told me that one day in the mid 1980s he noticed a strange and unusual thing: a lone camper van parked in fields by the old bridge full of sleeping young Australians in wetsuits. Since then, there has really been no end to the visitors, everyone increasingly drawn from the sticky hotels in Seminyak and Canggu. They gather here instead, inside great cloth pyramids thrown up in rice paddies, for acoustic bio-resonance sessions and vinyasa flow. Frowning hot-deskers run businesses out of open-plan bamboo co-working offices on the road along the forest, where every bank or bar down the crammed boulevards is a salon for foot rubs or vipassana meditation. Grizzled ex-soldiers having backpacked here, dazed, since the Gulf War, hug it out on the streets after tantra hatha. All the taut-muscle self-improvement gurus; all the prophesying voices and flotsam and jetsam drawn to tropical Asia, buying carvings of Durga with a tongue of fire, while traffic jams of scooters blare under gigantic pule trees dripping in vines.

Within an hour of being here, I thought: I have to leave. But I kept finding reasons not to. For the breeze can blow fresh from the north-eastern slopes of mounts Batur and Agung in the ochre and lilac distance, reminding you that this is an uplands town. Sometimes, a white mist creeps down the lanes with the sombre damp of a Cumbrian autumn. In legend, the mountains of Bali were created so the island's people

Above from left: a shower and oversized sofa at Rumah Hujan Villa. Opposite, clockwise from top left: pool at COMO Uma Ubud; hammock and guitar at Rumah Hujan Villa; palms in Tegalalang; the studio of Rumah Hujan's architect. Previous pages, from left: rice paddies; bedroom at Rumah Hujan Villa



could live in an airy place, under skies of rare flowers, where snakes manifest as falling stars.

And so one weekend I drive north, towards the mountains, with my friend Bawa to visit his mother, juddering in a dented car beyond the art shops and abhyanga massage huts on the edge of town. We stop to let pass a procession for a festival of the full moon. ‘*Tat twam asi, tat twam asi,*’ sing a long line of celebrants carrying offerings. ‘I am you and you are me.’ Green tangerines and sotong fruit, tobacco and matches, fried *jaje*, or sugar-cakes, moulded into figurines of priests. A village toddler wearing leopard-print leggings holds a quivering duck. There are no official wise men amongst the procession from this particular temple, says Bawa, because many are already present in spirit, their bodies unseen. Balinese Hinduism has deep-rooted overtones of animism, touches of Buddhism and Shaivism, cults of the underworld – a knotty assimilation, everything eventually organised to compliment the sympathetic temperament of the people. Most days there’s some kind of celebration: marriage and funeral rites, the hoisting of temple ornaments and parasols, demigods, protectors, antagonisers. The pure of heart sometimes walk on hot coals that redden and blacken, and then redden again.

It’s Sunday, and along the roads families are out together for the day, stopping at cafés for suckling pig and immense neon-coloured crackers, like party crisps for giants, sold in bags at stalls next to petrol in old vodka bottles. Brooms and Calor gas, hair combs and wild vanilla. Bottles of arak, the local hooch, that will knock you out though it is the inculpable colour of apricot squash. Knobbled bushels of passion fruit, yellow as gobstoppers, and little fritters of eel, each tenacious creature caught with a bamboo

pincer at sunset when they come out to swim. Just beyond Bedugul – and the floating temples at Lake Bratan – our road thins and quickly winds up into dripping high jungle. Below, rice paddies on shining, descending plateaus are green and perfect as billiard tables. Long-tailed monkeys sit about the pitted tarmac with their hair madly stuck out all over. ‘Never look a monkey in the eye,’ warns Bawa, with owlish sincerity, fiddling with the fading radio signal. A crackle of Dangdut music: songs about women who love bad men and just can’t help it. ‘Arrest me!’ the lyrics chime out, over and over, as the morning deepens, ‘Or I might steal his soul.’

Bawa first left his remote northern village at the foot of Bebetin mountain as a teenager, to find work in Denpasar and eventually Ubud. He’d studied so hard in preparation, he would wake with a face thick with soot from long nights spent at his books by a guttering paraffin lamp. Climbing mangosteen trees after school each day, he would imagine the south. ‘I needed to know,’ he says, ‘of whatever lay beyond.’ He laughs, ‘I’m such a dreamer.’

Avocado trees swelter in the forest; coffee, too, white turmeric, and clove. Ginger plants with powerful roots the size of your thumb that you can boil into a head-lolling syrup. Trumpets of flowers lean into the car, and prehistoric ferns. And when we stop for a while at a temple in Bebetin where Bawa used to pray as a child, he shows me stone carvings of jewelled feet, swirling sprites, fragments of limbs and bodies, hands carrying ferocious swords. Moss covers everything, so the whole edifice seems living. One chiselled effigy of a woman in a panelled dress has hair so primly curled she could be on a medieval pew in Cornwall. How old? I ask, and Bawa shrugs. Bawa doesn’t know how old his mother is either. But then, neither does she. Time simply does what time will do.

IT’S NOT EASY BEING A TOWN KNOWN FOR CULTURE ON BALI, AN ISLAND WITH ALREADY SO MANY FANCIFUL DEFINITIONS

Above from left: Balinese spices; a temple ceremony. Opposite, clockwise from top left: rice terraces; a sculpture made from native wood; women in the rice fields of Tegalalang; one of the east-facing bedrooms and hammock in the living space at Rumah Hujan Villa







AVOCADO TREES SWELTER IN THE FOREST. GINGER PLANTS HAVE POWERFUL ROOTS THE SIZE OF YOUR THUMB TO BOIL INTO HEAD-LOLLING SYRUPS



IT'S NOT EASY BEING A TOWN RENOWNED for culture and healing on an island with already so many fanciful definitions. Island of Peace. Island of a Thousand Temples. Arcadia of the East. Ubud, so descended upon, so fluttering with flyers for the 'Solo female travellers network' (there are very few if any attacks on women visiting Bali) and 'Alchemy of breath'. This place is full of gurus in love with saving people, declaring on the great aliveness of the universe. One day as I'm standing looking at a poster for a talk on 'The alkalising effects of oat straw on the nervous system' along scooter-crammed Jalan Dewi Sita street, I think of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, taking the waters for her health at Bath, wondering which concert to attend, which improving lecture. Through the open gates of a house nearby I see a stone frieze of a hunter catching a topless angel at a river, stealing her sash and revealing her nakedness so she can't fly away. On a TV in the courtyard a teenage boy and his grandmother watch a popular show in which the contestant with the most virtuous heart wins a new house.

In the café at Tukies Coconut Shop (unmissable, and a stone's throw from the famed cocktails at Hujan Locale) the only sound, for a while, is the hum of a drowsy bee. Until sixty-something Kadek, who has a house next door, starts down the street with a long bamboo spike to ease down fresh frangipani blossom from high trees, for the early evening offering at his family temple.

Afternoons, weeks, a childhood, can pass like this, negotiating over and over the seductive knot of streets and shops, and faces. It can be impossible; a whirlwind of flies in the dog days, when everybody talks with nostalgia about how beautiful it used to be here, how green and unruined and cool. But Ubud is

UBUD IS ALWAYS VIVID. AND IN THE VALLEYS YOU STILL FIND THINGS THAT SEEM PROFOUNDLY REMOVED FROM THE PRESENT

always *vivid*. And in the fields and valleys of the Bangli regency south of Mount Batur especially you can still find things that seem profoundly removed from any documented present. One day, sworn to secrecy, I'm taken to a cleansing ritual in a hidden dell up a frothing river where I clamber for an hour along waterfalls, my fingers grasping for purchase, feet slipping off time-smoothed boulders, alongside a family from Jakarta, who've come especially to submit their toddler for a blessing. The child yells and kicks while a priest leads us in the dark through newly spun spiders' webs. On the river bank, a pig's spine has been strewn after a night sacrifice. Water pounds, blood knocks in my head from the effort – the surprise, and intensity. When I eventually

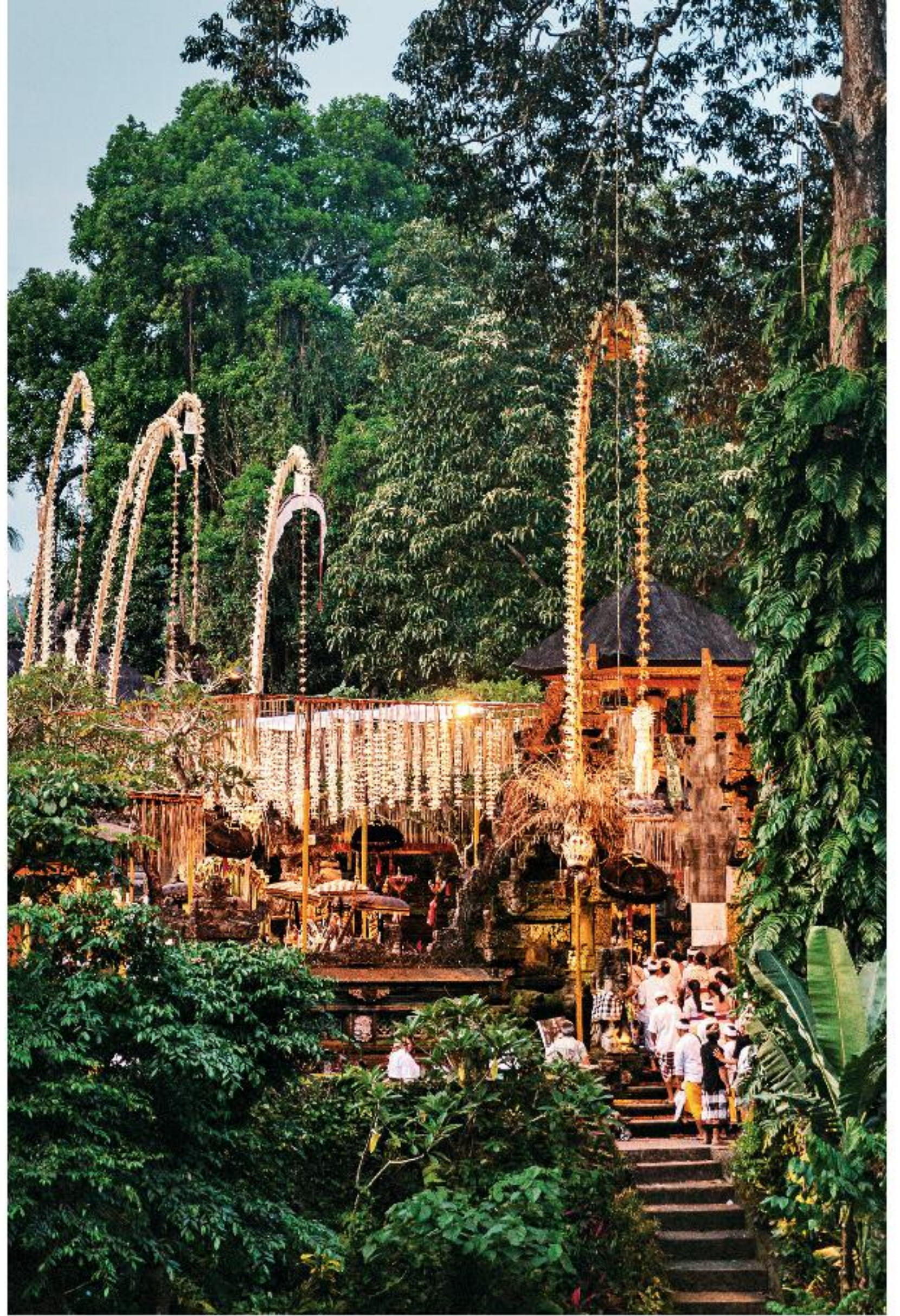
return to where I'd started, on a stone promontory sits the yawning temple dog, and by its side, a praying mantis, Disney-green and glimmering like a nugget of peridot.

For a few hours after that, I don't think I have ever felt better in my life. Or seen things so close up. I stumble

back down the lanes of Ubud, passing the children's karate team all chatting with ceremonial dancing girls waiting to give a performance under pounds-weight of costume jewellery, their headdresses grand and jutting as chandeliers. Past the men playing chess surrounded by cages of furious cipoh birds, and the American ex-flight attendant, who sits outside Naughty Nuri's BBQ all day, slowly drinking Pisco Sours and reading crime novels until his ancient golden Labrador shambles to its feet to lead him home. Women carry baskets of eggs and incense on their heads, turning circles and talking under a sunset as crimson as a fantasy of vengeance that flickers over a thousand stone demons dressed in skirts of chequered cloth, slung with bruised garlands of orange marigolds. 📍

Above from left: temple entrance; Pura Dalem temple; Capella Ubud. Opposite, clockwise from top: a musician in Tegalalang; umbrellas in the rice fields; Rumah Hujan Villa; fern; typical Ubud breakfast. Previous pages, from left: the pool at Capella Ubud; the palm trees and terraces of Tegalalang







WHERE TO STAY

COMO SHAMBHALA ESTATE

Opened in 2005, this wellness trailblazer hacked out of a jungle that slopes down to the tumbling Ayung River remains a legendary retreat.

Poised over wind-swaying, forested gorges, rooms have a gentle Japanese air, with outdoor stone baths overlooking dazzling green rice paddies. There's a resident Ayurvedic doctor, gorgeous treatments, soul-searching yoga and eating plans as draconian or relaxed as guests choose. Steep steps in the gardens lead to a natural sacred pool that sits in the landscape like a cupped hand, attended by an effigy of Ganesh. comohotels.com. From £1,710 for three nights, including breakfast, one wellness consultation and two activities

COMO UMA UBUD

Peering into the Tjampuhan Valley, a place that might have invented the colour green, is Shambhala's sister hotel. A 30-minute walk from town, camouflaged among fragrant banyans and frangipani, it's a heavenly half-way house between inner and outer Ubud. Interiors master Koichiro Ikebuchi also achieves harmony between clean-lined contemporary design and a homey, village feel with stone pathways, pagoda roofs and netted beds in the 46 open rooms. There are a few bold blocks of colour: the lipstick-red of the day-beds, the squeezed-orange sofas opposite the bar, the flash turquoise of pools, as if to counterbalance the intense emerald landscape. comohotels.com. Doubles from £315

RUMAH HUJAN VILLA

Obscured by trees and pleated into the Tjampuhan ridge high above the Wos River at the top of Ubud town, this superbly modernist three-

bedroomed bungalow was not only designed by Venezuelan architect Maximilian Jencquel but built with his own hands. The sun rises directly in front the villa, which was crafted from reclaimed materials, locally sourced lava stones and cooling marble. The outdoors is incorporated in such a relaxed way that when delicate little birds quit the gardens of mango and papaya to line up by the edge of the saltwater pool they scarcely turn a feather if you slip in to join them. The staff arrange massages and make delicious breakfasts of pandan-leaf pancakes. rumahhujan.com. From about £505 per night, minimum three nights (sleeps six)

CAPELLA UBUD

North of Ubud in the Keliki valley, this property by cult hotelier Bill Bensley is a jungle campsite of 22 tented one-bedroom residences, so romantic they feel like the near-deranged dream of a monied Victorian explorer: swags of fabric, copper baths, oil paintings, Indonesian carving, floors of dimpled teak. Rope suspension bridges swing over saltwater plunge pools to the sound of the river bowling through the night. A huge swimming pool made from custom steel has been set in the gardens and looks like something Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* would have insisted on. Klaus Kinski could emerge in white linen at any moment dragging a gramophone blaring Strauss. capellahotels.com. Doubles from about £785

GETTING HERE

Cleveland Collection offers tailor-made holidays to Indonesia. A sample trip including two nights at COMO Uma Ubud, three nights at COMO Shambhala, breakfast at both, flights and transfers costs from £1,999 per person. +44 20 7843 3531; clevelandcollection.co.uk

Above from left: native palm; the pool and dining room with an ironwood table at Rumah Hujan Villa. Opposite, clockwise from top left: tented residence at Capella Ubud; Pura Gunung Lebah temple; a palm-shaded pool; copper bathtub at Capella; a view of Mount Agung