



*The surrounding countryside offers a plentiful rice harvest.*

Situated a 45 minute drive north of Kuta, Ubud is more than just the artistic and cultural capital of Bali. Over the past ten years it has developed into possibly the island's most popular all-round destination.

Ubud's reputation as an arts centre developed earlier this century with the arrival of two European artists in Bali, Walter Spies and Rudolph Bonnet. Captivated by the beauty of the countryside, they settled in the area in the late 1920s and started to paint. The presence of these foreign artists greatly influenced the Balinese painters in the region who previously had been restricted to religious and ceremonial expression. A new style of painting emerged with broader themes and using different colours but which was still recognisably Balinese.

The rise in the number of artists living in and around Ubud led to the formation of an artists' association, the Pita Maha, in 1936. This association was dedicated to perfecting this new style of painting while maintaining quality and direction. It was also a move away from the trend of supplying cheap art to the growing number of tourists who were visiting the village, drawn by its artistic appeal.

Since that time Ubud has changed dramatically from a sleepy little village into a bustling town. Whereas homestays used to be the only accommodation available, now the area is blessed with some of the most exclusive hotels on the island. The dramatic Oos and Ayung river valleys that so influenced Spies and Bonnet now host magnificent hotels like the Tjampuhan resorts, the Four Seasons and the Chedi.

Apart from shopping, visiting the Monkey Forest and watching traditional dances, there are an amazing amount of activities available in the area. The Ayung river has world-class rapids, especially in the rainy season and white water rafting is available with professional companies like Sobek and Bali Adventure Tours. These companies also offer other activities like mountain biking, jungle trekking and guided walks through rice paddies which are a great opportunity to get out and experience the countryside. It is equally easy to rent a bike and set off to explore the back roads by yourself. As you meander through small kampungs' and dramatic



*Peddalling Paradise.*



*An early morning stroll.*



*The Four Seasons at Sayan.*

scenery at a sedate pace, it is difficult not to be hypnotised by the beauty of the island and its people. 'Extend' is a very common word in the hotel industry up here.

For those shopping for art and crafts, the area is famous throughout Bali for its silversmiths, woodcarvers and stone sculptors. The villages of Batubulan, Celuk and Mas, which you pass through on the way up from Denpasar, are lined with craft shops and galleries and Sukawati, ten minutes out of Ubud, has a very popular art market.

There is no shortage of art galleries to enjoy with regular exhibitions put on by institutions like the Seniwati Gallery of Art by Women, The Gallery at the Chedi, Pranoto's Art Gallery and the Agung Rai Art Museum. A more substantial permanent collection is available at the Puri Lukisan Museum and the impressive Neka Museum, which houses examples of all the main schools of art on the island. There are paintings by famous foreign artists like Arie Smit, Rudolph Bonnet and Han Snel and renowned local artists like I Nyoman Tjakra and I Ketut Soki.

Also nearby is the excellent Bali Bird Park and Reptile Park to the south and the Elephant Safari Park to the north, both very

popular for day excursions and well worth a visit.

It is relaxation however that Ubud has built its name on and this reputation has recently been enhanced by the arrival of the epitome of luxury and pampering, the spa. There is no better way to rest your weary limbs after a full day's exercise than at one of the town's many spas and health clubs. One of the newest spas to open in Ubud is actually situated in the oldest hotel in the town, the historical Tjampuhan. The hotel first opened as a guest house for the Ubud royal family in 1928 and it was here that Walter Spies lived while in Ubud from 1934 until 1942. His house still stands in the hotel's grounds which are carved deep in the jungle of the Oos river valley. The hotel itself is staggered down the slopes of the valley with small paths leading up, down and around the sculpted terraces and gardens, all under a thick jungle canopy. The spa is situated almost at water level and although less than four months old, appears like a hidden palace from a bygone era. Entering down a small watery path, you find yourself in a large multi level cave whose roof is almost entirely decorated with intricately carved traditional figures. Statues stand watch in corners and the cool air is filled with a light

incense and the sound of running water.

Candlelight reflections dance above beautiful rock pools which are in fact hot and cold jacuzzis and ice cold plungers. Steam rooms and saunas lie hidden down a rocky passage which you follow to get to the treatment rooms. When trying to find the perfect music to relax to, surely nothing can come close to the sound of a river, punctuated by birdsong, for total relief for the senses.

If the Tjampuhan Hotel is a good example of traditional architecture blending into the countryside, the Four Seasons in nearby Sayan, is an amazing testament to the modern equivalent. The amazing saucer shaped main building, perched high in the Ayung river valley, sits like a parked spacecraft which has allowed nature to grow over and around it creating a surreal mix of future and flora. The result is one of the most impressive and innovative hotels in the world which is well worth a visit, if not for the architecture then for the views from the fantastic Ayung Terrace restaurant. Ubud is an excellent place to get a feel for the island and its people. Whether you plan to stay a day, a week or a month, there is more than enough to keep you as active or relaxed as you wish. 🌿