

UBUD

REVISITED

TWENTY YEARS AGO, A YOUTHFUL **MARK BIBBY JACKSON** VISITED THE REMOTE VILLAGE OF UBUD IN BALI. **ASIALIFE'S** PUBLISHER RETURNS TO SEE THAT MANY THINGS HAVE CHANGED.

Never go back. This truism applies as much to great holiday destinations as to failed relationships or any murder you may just happen to have committed. Now the doctors assure me that my days of multiple homicide are behind me, so relationship folly aside my greatest risk lies in trying to recapture a magical holiday experience that has become lost in faded images of time.

June 1994. I was taking time off from a dusty office where people were planning a cross-London railway project, which to this day is not yet completed. Trekking through Nepal people told me Bali was the place I just had to visit. "Ubud man!" they would say, their eyes frosting over.

While not quite the drug-hazed hippy nirvana of Afghanistan and Morocco in the 60s – and Kathmandu still was at the time – Ubud possessed a spirituality that was quite unique. Wandering through its quiet streets, the only noise was the wind blowing through

bamboo charms dangling haphazardly from wooden ceilings, occasional cow bells and the ubiquitous Balinese rindik music that seemed a prerequisite for any green café.

Fast forward 20 years and I find myself standing on the side of a congested street, choking on exhaust fumes while trying to make out which of the seemingly endless stream of SUVs and minibuses was my hotel pick-up. Twenty years ago my greatest danger was an unwashed piece of lettuce, now carbon monoxide asphyxiation seemed a real possibility. I felt in desperate need of the mystical, restorative powers of ice cold Bintang beer. Somehow Ubud's charm had become collateral damage in the mad and seemingly unregulated scramble for tourist dollar and yuan.

Fortunately, it is not all this way. Despite the excessive tourism in the intervening 20 years you can still find pockets of charm amid the diasporic chaos. Wandering along the main road from the Monkey Forest, where tourist line up to take snaps

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of the cheeky animals trying to nab bananas amid the now neglected temples, to the main temple, I stumble upon a familiar name. Hidden among the signs inviting me to purchase Giordano, RipCurl, and, most sadly of all Starbucks, is Café Wayan - a mainstay of mine in the previous millennium.

Cafés such as Wayan offer secluded oases at the rear where you can stretch out on daybeds and enjoy some *gado gado* or *nasi goreng*. The occasional hoot of a motorbike is the only evidence that much has changed in the intervening 20 years.

The manager explains that Wayan has stood here for 29 years. Her name is also Wayan,

but she laughs when I ask whether she is the owner – the name apparently is as popular in Bali as Jones is in Wales. Like Ubud, Café Wayan has changed with time, a large garden extension to the rear and the addition of cookery classes – a concept that was as alien as mobile phones, Facebook and Karaoke TV in 1994 – indicate that business is good.

Wayan refuses to comment when asked directly. For her extra money just means greater funds to donate at one of the island's many ceremonies. Today is the Day of Metal, where people make their pilgrimage to the temple to make blessings to all things metallic. "People want

their own space nowadays – that is the new luxury," says Alain Bachmann, the general manager of the Chedi Club Tanah Gajah, a few kilometres outside of Ubud, over breakfast. "People come here to experience that."

I feel most fortunate. The resort was the private estate of architect Hendra Hadiprana, one of Indonesia's most respected art collectors. Ten years ago, though still owned by Hadiprana, it was transformed into an intimate retreat with 20 individual villas by hotel group GHM. The rooms still contain his eclectic collection of art, giving it an unplanned charm that you can't find in today's motif-driven, corporate resort chains.

For me, the real charm lies on the periphery. The resort is surrounded by acres of paddy fields, untouched by developers since Hadiprana took over his plot of land in the early 80s. This is Bali's real attraction, what made it so unique, and still does, albeit in much smaller doses than before. Whereas previously I could wander off any street and find myself

engulfed by rice stalks, tour companies now offer special excursions to visit them.

I admit to feel saddened when I left Ubud to return to the coast, although chatting to my driver on the optimism he has for the new Indonesian prime minister and the future he wants to provide for his children, I realise not all change has been for the worse.

Bali has never truly been about the coast – at least not the stretches of beach around Kuta where even 20 years ago bronzed Australian men would walk around bare-chested carrying a surf board under their arm as if in some primal mating ritual. Now, staying at the Chedi Sakala, just across from the beach at Tanjung Benoa I am amazed by the chaos in the water at this major water sports destination. Air-borne inflatable lilos compete with banana boats and speedboats for naval supremacy, while the sands become a mere access route for things more dramatic.

Spoilt for choice, I elect instead to head along the

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coast to Finn's Beach Club, Uluwatu, where the Chedi Sakala's general manager, Giulio D'Alberto, has promised I will have a special time. During mid afternoon the beach is filled with like-minded people, but as the sun sets and the heat is removed from the sands, the fading light starts flickering on the waves. I order a margarita as the staff create a bonfire on the now deserted beach and ponder what was. At least some experiences are indeed timeless. *Air Asia has daily direct flights to Bali Ngurah Rai International, Denpasar from Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. For information visit <http://www.airasia.com>.* 