

A pool in Amandari, a
"place of peaceful spirits"

ON A BALI HIGH

BY SUZANNE WRIGHT

At Amandari, a "place of peaceful spirits" in Ubud, I am privileged to watch a unique form of Hinduism and its daily ceremonies unfold. Unlike many ultra-deluxe resorts, Amandari's architecture is integrated with the village of Kedewan and shares a unique intimacy with the community. Every morning, local women balancing a basket filled with *banten*, traditional offerings of fruit, rice, incense and flowers, on their heads, bless the many statues throughout the grounds. There's also a beautiful, and frequently used, temple at the base of the resort near the Ayung River.

I feel immensely blessed in villa 15, a bungalow within a walled compound overlooking a rice paddy and a lush emerald gorge. It also has a private infinity pool, where I swim in the buff under a brilliant blue sky and again under a star-speckled canopy, the night air fragrant with frangipani and jasmine. Every time I return to my room, there's a little treat: a fizzy drink, chocolate, fruit or flowers. At turndown, a *cili*, woven coconut leaves in the shape of a female deity, is placed on my pillow as a blessing.

A rooster serves as my wake-up call. I arise in anticipation of a 4.5-mile hike through the Ayung Valley with the resort's guide, Japa, whose smile trumps Tom Cruise's. We pick our way down steep steps past sweet potato,

coffee and papaya plots, then uphill and across the "dancing bridge," a swaying wooden bridge that spans the river below.

Village children clamor to have their photo taken, a wizened priest nods hello on the way to the temple and a young mother proudly holds an infant with pierced ears and a silver amulet hanging around her neck, which encases her umbilical cord—believed to ward off evil spirits. A rail-thin woman, perhaps 70, hoists a huge load of wood on her back. She sprints ahead of us and playfully turns to watch our progress throughout the hike, her toothless grin revealing a lifelong tobacco habit. Besides the interaction with the locals, the reward, three hours later, is a delectable breakfast in a *bale*, or thatched hut, with spectacular views of the verdant land.

In the town of Ubud, the cultural heart of Bali, I visit the beautifully landscaped pavilions of the Neka Art Museum for an introduction to Balinese art. Along Monkey Forest Road there are a few scampering primates—and lots of snap-happy tourists—but mostly a profusion of shops. Overwhelmed by the staggering number of carvings and paintings, I sip a dry martini, the house drink, and gnaw on grilled lamb chops at Naughty Nuri's, run by New York transplant Brian and his Balinese wife.

The next day, I'm off to Amankila, in the quiet eastern part of Bali. Talk about "wow" factor: The endless ocean vista, bilevel infinity pool and open-air reception of the resort leave me momentarily speechless. The climb on elevated

walkways to villa 33 is worth every step as I take in the panorama. Aman Resorts' architecture is simple and respectful of the land, with low furniture that widens the dramatic views and a series of doors and removable "walls" that open onto the terrace. The monochromatic color scheme is hushed, the use of indigenous materials such as coconut wood is elegant.

In the nearby village of Tangenan, which seems untouched by time, I check out crafts. A young man is making *lontar*, comic strips and calendars made from palm leaves rubbed with burnt candlenut oil to reveal intricate knife etchings. When I return to the resort, three tiny, nut-brown girls, perhaps 10 or so, toss flower petals into the air in greeting and perform a traditional dance in welcome. As night falls, a *kecak*, often called the "monkey dance," gets under way. It features the trancelike "cak cak cak" chanting of nearly a hundred boys and men sitting around a bon-

The Ayung River
Gorge in Amandari

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AMAN RESORTS

IF YOU GO

Sadly, Bali, like many countries, has been a victim of bombings (2002 and 2005). But all the major hotels and many restaurants have detection devices in place. I felt safe—and welcome—throughout my two-week stay. The tourism infrastructure is very well-developed, and the island is easy to navigate.

Where to stay

To book any of Aman Resorts' Indonesian properties, visit www.amanresorts.com.

When to go

The dry season is from April to October, although I enjoyed clement weather in January.

For general information

Visit www.tourismindonesia.com to learn more about Indonesia.

fire on the beach. As they rhythmically slap their bare chests and thighs, a choreographed dance is performed. A priest sits in the middle of the action.

In the southern part of Bali, Amanusa maintains a barrier from the encroaching development and a breathtaking hilltop view of the terracotta roofs of new developments that reminds me of Santa Barbara. If you are a golfer, Amanusa is for you; if you are a beach lover, the pool butlers will keep a steady supply of iced towels, cold drinks and sunscreen coming. After a barbecue that includes long bean salad with coconut milk, *gado gado*, spit-roasted duck, roast suckling pig, grilled prawns, mahi mahi in banana leaf and fish satay with lemongrass, I stop to admire the yellow sashes and black-and-white checked cloth draping a Hindu statue.

Like Bali, it's an expression of gratitude for a life rich with rituals. **SP**