



Paradise re-found

Returning to Bali twelve years on, Jillian Bolger wonders if this romantic island will hold appeal for a family holiday.





A stone deity spouts a stream of water into our private pool. Close by, my son scoops frangipani from the ground, mistaking them for butterflies. A wisp of incense catches the breeze, and drifts past my sun lounger. Time has stopped. The sun beats down. And I know I'm back in paradise.

They say you should never re-visit special places, for fear of an anti-climax, or tarnishing sacred memories. I first visited Bali twelve years ago, as a wide-eyed backpacker dipping her toe in Asia for the first time. I'd never seen anything quite as exotic, and, despite having subsequently visited dozens of other countries, Asian and further afield, I still swear Bali is the most fragrant place on earth.

This time round I've traded my backpack for matching luggage, my friend for a husband, my budget accommodation for five-star luxury. And then there's our two-year-old son in tow. On an island where children are considered sacred (and the younger they are, the closer to god they're deemed to be), Cal is king. He is scooped up by staff, lavished with gifts, doted on in restaurants, smiled at on street corners and shown as much attention as the honeymooners in our resort. Extra peas in your macaroni cheese? No problem. 3am room service for milk? No bother. Mum and Dad need to finish breakfast? Let's go and feed the fish.

I've always been critical of large resorts in exotic places. Many offer such sanitised experiences that you could check out after a week unsure what country you've even visited. Four Seasons Resorts in Bali couldn't be further from that stereotype. In one way, they have a major advantage. So many luxury hotels around the world, from The Maldives to The Med, have been heavily influenced by Balinese architecture and interiors. Here, in Bali, you get the real deal: nothing pseudo, nothing pastiche, just genuine, indigenous Balinese style. And it's done so well.

Perched on a gently terraced hillside overlooking a sweeping crescent of sand, Four Seasons Jimbaran Bay is an all-villa resort, where guests can play it as low key as they like. Each thatched villa recreates a traditional Balinese building, with a courtyard surrounded by an open-sided pavilion, an infinity pool (fitted with safety rail for us), and an air-conditioned sleeping pavilion. The open pavilion boasts a family-sized day bed stacked with slouchy cushions, a dining area, stereo and fully stocked bar. The sleeping pavilion is kitted out with every manner of luxury, including a spacious dressing room, sensational, oversized bath, huge shower and a gorgeous garden shower that's secreted away in a tiny stone courtyard.



Previous page: Sip cocktails and chill out just steps from the sparkling ocean. Opposite page: Sweeping views around the pristine curve of Jimbaran Bay. This page clockwise from top: Frangipani grow everywhere, and scatter to the ground like butterflies; Our one-bedroom villa was spacious and luxurious; The bedrooms can be opened up to embrace the fragrant island air; Jimba Club is a fun space for children, indoors and out.

All day villa dining is possible at the resort, which is a real plus with a little boy who still needs a mid-day nap. In traditional hotels the holiday often has to stop while baby is brought back to the room for a snooze. In Jimbaran Bay we often ordered lunch in our villa, and, after eating in our private dining area (maybe chicken fried rice from the children's menu, a luxurious coconut shrimp salad or bowl of fresh gado-gado for Mum and Dad), Cal could go down for a nap while we continued sun lounging, swimming, or, occasionally, napping too.

Despite having competition from over 17,000 other Indonesian islands, Bali is still number one in terms of global profile, desirability and tourist numbers. It doesn't take the visitor long to appreciate its exotic appeal, nor to ascertain that the island indeed lives up to its lofty reputation. Mother Nature has been more than benevolent in the beauty stakes: Think emerald volcanic cones, lush green rice fields, powder white beaches, ruby red sunsets and azure blue skies. Throw in jewel-coloured flowers cascading from every surface, incense wafting dreamily through the air and haunting gamelan chimes filling the evening, and you have one sweet recipe for a paradise retreat.

Travelling with young children undoubtedly changes the pace and style of a holiday. At Four Seasons Jimbaran Bay every possible element has been considered to allow parents enjoy their holiday time too. Jimba Club welcomes

children from 2 to 12 and offers daily activities and games to keep youngsters amused. All four restaurants in the resort have extensive children's menus and crayons and puzzles are on hand at a minute's notice. You'll hardly want to deposit your little darlings at the children's club from dusk till dawn, but it is a great amenity should you fancy a couple's pamper session at the celebrated spa, a few hours of water sports or maybe a morning session at the hotel's purpose-built cookery school. Even better, is the complimentary evening babysitting, which allows parents a few quiet hours alone for a romantic meal.

If you abandon your kids only once during your stay at this heavenly hideaway, make sure to do it when *Beds on The Beach* is on the menu. Once a week, 25 canopied beds are set up on the sands of Jimbaran Beach in front of PJ's Restaurant. Hundreds of lanterns are placed on the beach, right down to the water's edge, a band plays chill out tunes and you sit back on your private pillows awaiting a five-course gastronomic thrill. The menu will include treats like foie gras, oysters, spiny lobster or Australian sirloin, all imaginatively prepared and beautifully presented. As you finish off with a chocolate confection, roll over on your bed and breathe in the warm Indian Ocean air you'll understand completely, perhaps not for the first time, why Bali really is The Island of the Gods.



*Left: Sunset by your villa pool is private and peaceful.
Above: Dramatic stone temples dot the Island of Gods.*

Travel File

Malaysia Airlines has fares from Dublin to Denpasar via Kuala Lumpur. Flights cost around €660, excluding taxes. Try www.ebookers.ie. A one-bedroom villa at Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay costs from US\$630 per night (no charge for a child under 12 sharing with parents). 5-day family packages in two-bedroom villas cost US\$7,825, including daily breakfast for four, a Parents Night Out candlelight dinner with wine, and family excursion of your choice exploring Bali with private car and driver. See www.fourseasons.com/jimbaranbay for more packages.

Not just for honeymooners | Bali offers fun activities for kids of all ages

WATERBOM WATER PARK

Head to Waterbom Park in Kuta for a full day of fun. There's a separate area for youngsters with smaller waterslides, water cannons, pools and changing areas, while the rest of the park has high-speed slides, numerous pools, tubing on a lazy river and choice of restaurants. If you have young children, hire out a hut, which offers great shade all day. waterbom.com.

SACRED MONKEY FOREST SANCTUARY

Don't dare bring food in your bags to Monkey Forest in Ubud. The resident macaques are far from shy, and will clamber up your body as you walk, grab at your bag or pockets, and generally pester you until you relinquish your booty. A safer bet is to buy a bunch

of bananas en route to the forest and feed the friendly primates by hand. They'll still ambush you until your food is gone, but the kids will love the thrill of these tiny monkeys playing at their feet. monkeyforestubud.com.

TAMAN BURUNG BIRD PARK

Huge stroll-through aviaries showcase over 1000 birds from 250 different species. There's flight displays, interactive feeding sessions and kids will love the exotic plumage and colours of the various parrots, cockatoos, birds of paradise, kingfishers, hornbills and cassowaries. bali-bird-park.com.

ELEPHANT SAFARI PARK

Learn all about elephants' habits, lifestyles and needs, and their threatened survival,

before saddling up and trundling through the jungle on board your own jumbo. Children will love the playful antics, when the animals take a cooling shower, play football, or get hand fed. These native Sumatran elephants, rescued from deforestation, are well cared for and live in large, lush enclosures. baliadventuretours.com.

MOUNTAIN BIKING

Less about tackling mountains, and more about cycling up gentle hills topped with temples, through emerald rice paddies, around volcanic lakes and along black sand beaches. It's a long day out, with an early start, so children under twelve might find it too much. balicheckin.com.