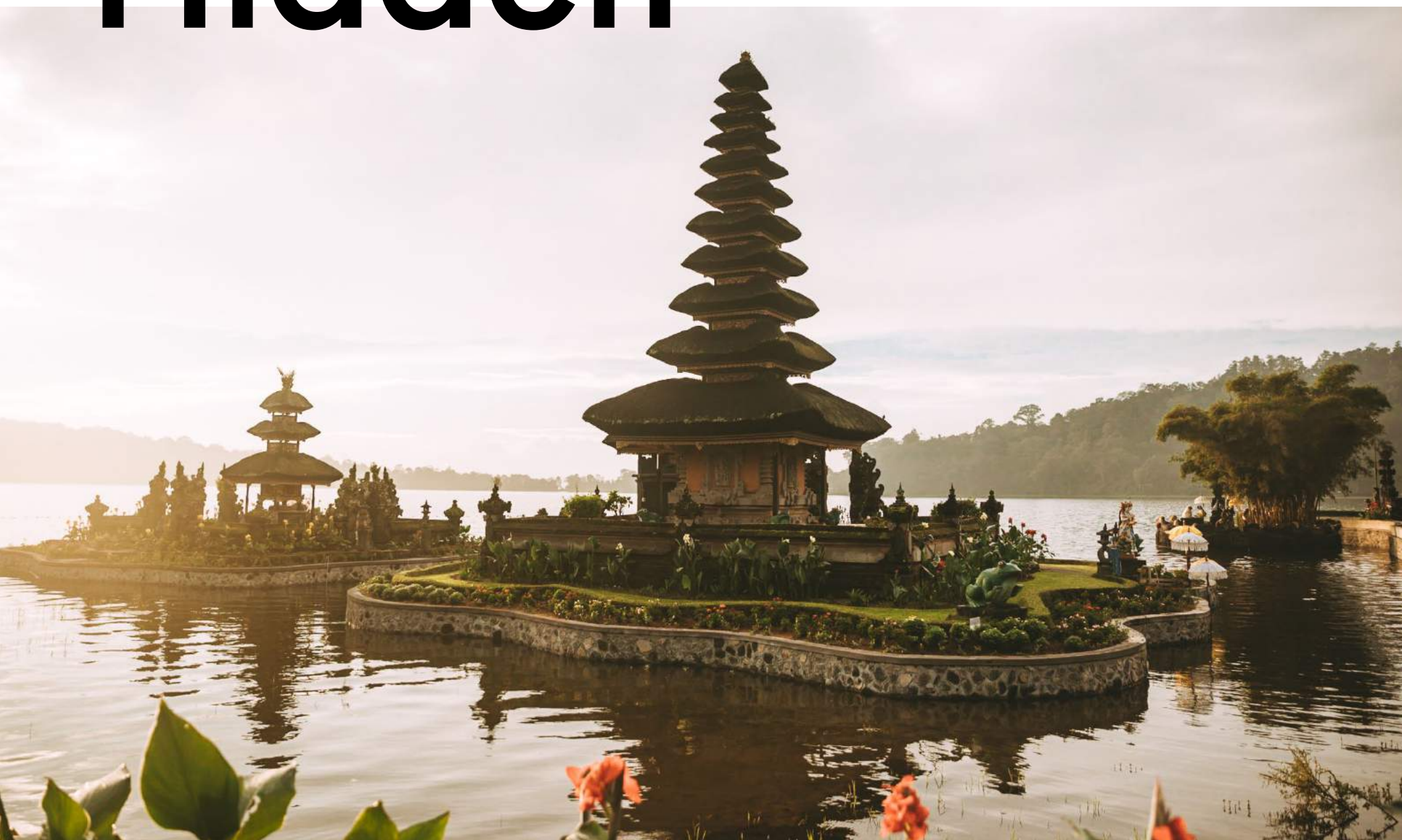


# Hidden



Stepping outside the usual tourist traps, we find many more reasons why there is still much to discover in Bali

By Nanda Haensel

# Gems







## SPIRITUALITY HERE RUNS DEEP, AS WELL AS THE AGE-OLD CUSTOMS THAT ATTEND THE SYNCRETISM OF HINDUISM, BUDDHISM, AND ANIMISM

**I**t's almost harvest season in the Munduk Mountain Valley. The sun is about to set, and birds approach the rice fields despite being chased away by farmers who remain on constant alert. Here, in this pocket of north Bali, there is a sublime emptiness. The climate is surprisingly refreshing and the vibe, bucolic. I'm in Sanak, a small family-run retreat, where I find myself amid tropical landscapes with scenic mountains. It has the essence of an older Indonesia and feels like the Bali of another time.

My journey to this hidden side of Bali started in the early morning, though, on the back of a motorbike. From Tabanan Regency, I headed north, passing by Balian—a bohemian surfing village—and then moved westwards along an untouched coast with views to Mount Batukaru. Mountains loomed above verdant rice terraces and striking black-sand beaches. I drove towards the northern part of Bali, in the direction of volcanoes.

So here I am, deep inland in Munduk Mountain Valley and surrounded by raw nature. As I navigate across the region, I'm obsessed with pristine waterfalls, valleys, and hiking trails. It's a Bali I have not experienced before. I watch the first morning light from Ulun Danu Beratan Temple in Danau Beratan Lake and hike to Leke Leke and Munduk waterfalls. Then, I drive from Sanak to Vila Manuk, my next guesthouse, taking smaller roads, in the shadow of holy volcanoes, alongside villages adhering to traditional customs.

Not far from Vila Manuk, in Lemukih village—the upland region of the Buleleng Regency—is arguably the most magnificent cluster of cascades on the island. Getting down to this site is a tricky business: it requires paths over dirt tracks, hundreds of steps, and crossings over streams. But when I reach the foot of the 85-metre-tall fall, I am electrified by what is in front of me. Sekumpul waterfall is a scenic cluster of six to seven narrow cascades that form the centrepiece of a lush, green bamboo forested valley. The powerful Sekumpul and Fiji falls are hidden in the dense jungles of Bali, with its waters violently crashing down on the rocks, to end up streaming away in small streams, further into the forest. How interesting is to gain a new perspective on an Indonesian wilderness—one that plunges me into the natural magnetism of this alluring island.

But there are more than remarkable natural riches. To witness a robust and timeless culture is one of Bali's







biggest draws. We drive for two hours towards rural Ubud on a rainy day. En route, we see spectacular views of Mount Batur enriching the land with fertile soil. Just two kilometres north from hectic Ubud is Stone House, a superb B&B where I stay and deeply inhale the spirit of Bali's cultural hub. A place that evokes village life between paddy field and jungle with manicured style. From one of Stone House's guests, I learn there is a prominent Hindu ceremony happening in the following week. It's one that happens every 17 years, so I have no choice but to extend my stay. Spirituality here runs deep, as well as the age-old customs that attend the syncretism of Hinduism, Buddhism, and animism.

Driving further along the northeast coast towards Amed for a one-night trip, I notice that a new scenery takes over. Suddenly there are no rice paddies around me, but small decorated roads, black-sand beaches, and countless fishing boats. On the next early morning, on my way back to the Ubud countryside, I stop to watch the sunrise. I am in



Bukit Cinta viewpoint, with Mount Agung right in front of me. It feels like I am near the earth's beating heart. And, in many ways, I am. Mount Agung is an active volcano situated on the Pacific's combustible Ring of Fire. A place with exhilarating beauty that again puts Indonesia's wilderness into perspective and is a compelling reminder of my unimportance.

Later that morning, before heading back to Stone House, I see an old woman coming along the road. She carries upon her head a woven basket filled with marigolds, palm leaves, and a few rupiah notes. As she makes her way to Lempuyang Luhur temple, behind her, a trail of other women, men, and children in traditional outfits. I follow the path in wonder and all of a sudden; I am the only foreigner, taking part in a Balinese Hindu ceremony. There is that moment I realize I'm in the middle of something extraordinary. While tourism arguably commercializes traditional ways of life, it's always a privilege to witness authentic, sacred rituals. ❶

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