



The Next Island Over

Lombok is no Bali—and that’s just the point. Long overshadowed by its famous neighbor to the west, this Indonesian island is ready to emerge as a destination in its own right, with a raft of luxury villas and resorts to match

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Stage lights gleam off elaborate coiffures and shocking-pink lipstick as a steady procession of models strut and saunter down a catwalk. House music drowns out the hum of cicadas and the lapping of Indian Ocean waves; powerful spotlights obscure the glow of a low-slung moon as they fitfully roam the night sky. My hands occupied with a champagne flute and canapés, I let out a couple of encouraging whoops as the show closes with a skin-tight wedding dress that’s part punk, part vintage classic.

Scenes like these may be familiar in Bali, but we’re a good 40 kilometers east on the island of Lombok, where an exclusive runway show by designer Ivan Gunawan—current darling of the Jakarta couture scene and ebullient presenter of a recent spate of Indonesian reality TV shows—is, well, unexpected. Lombok is many things; fashionable is not one of them.

Even in its tourism heyday in the years before the Asian financial crisis of 1998, Lombok largely served as an addendum to its more glamorous neighbor, attracting a modest stream of visitors looking for a cheap, uncrowned beach holiday or a chance to climb Mount Rinjani, at 3,726 meters Indonesia’s second-highest volcano. But judging from the palpable buzz in tonight’s sultry air, that looks set to change.

IF LOMBOK’S CANVAS OF SAVANNAH-LIKE LANDSCAPES DOESN’T STRIKE A CORD, ITS BEACHES DEFINNITELY WILL: THE COASTLINE IS BY TURNS RUGGEDLY DRAMATIC AND SERENELY PICTURESQUE, WITH CURVING BAYS OF FLOURY WHITE SAND AND PLACID WATERS. BALI, EAT YOUR HEART OUT.

"Lombok is getting much more interest now – visitors are coming in direct from Jakarta and skipping Bali altogether," says Scott Coffey, the American owner of Qunci Villas and host of tonight's event. A former banker, Coffey officially "retired" to devote his time to this boutique resort in Mangsit, just north of Senggigi Beach. The Gunawan show is in fact his brainchild, staged to celebrate the opening of the adjoining Qunci Pool Villas, a snazzy minimalist enclave in textured beige and cream that bisects the beach with Pythagorean aplomb.

Coffey doesn't see Lombok as an alternative to Bali, but rather as a unique destination in its own right. "People come here for different reasons," he says. "Lombok's got great natural attractions and it's still peaceful. At the same time, we're trying to say that, hey, it really has its own scene too."

That scene is not confined to Senggigi, whose collection of guesthouses and three – and four-star hotels is the most developed resort strip on the island. The Tanjung area, a few kilometers to the north, is staging its own quiet revolution. The tourism trails here were originally blazed by India's Oberoi hotel group, which established a lone five-star outpost on Medana Beach in early 1997. Now, there's also the Tugu – the first new luxury resort to have opened in Lombok since ... well, since the Oberoi.

An Indonesian-owned operation with sister properties in Bali and Malange, East Java, the Tugu is a beach-hugging revelation of antique revivalism and mythical whimsy that belies the oft-banded fiction that Lombok offers little in the way of cultural heritage. The wooden house that functions as the hotel's lobby – complete with Moroccan tile skirting, colonial chairs sporting Deco curlicues, Chinese lacquerware, and faded oil paintings – feels like the home of some eccentric and well traveled great uncle. I learn later from general manager Sebastian Liebold that this is not an homage to the past but a resurrection, for in the 19th century this structure stood in the port town of Ampenan, now subsumed by Lombok's sprawling, ramshackle capital, Mataram.

"It belonged to a Sumatran named Haji Abdul Kadir, who rented it to a Chinese businessman," Liebold explains over afternoon tea. "That's why there's such a mix of cultural influences: Arabic, Chinese, European, Indonesian. When the Dutch segregated all the different ethnic groups living in Mataram in the late 1800s, the house was dismantled" – only to be rediscovered more than a century later by Anhar Setjadibrata, owner of the Tugu group and a prolific collector of Indonesian artifacts.

WHILE THE DEEP STRAIL that separates Lombok from Bali is only about 40 kilometers across, the two islands are a world apart. Or, as one promotional Web site puts it, "You can see Bali in Lombok, but you can't see Lombok in Bali." Part of this is geographical. Traveling through what was then the Dutch East Indies in the mid-19th century, Alfred Russel Wallace, the British naturalist whose own musings about natural selection would inform Darwin's evolutionary theories, noted that the flora and fauna of Bali were markedly different from those of Lombok. He proposed a line between the two – and to the northeast between Borneo and Sulawesi – marking the boundary between the biomes of Asia and Australia.

The so-called Wallace Line no longer carries the weight of conviction it once did, but it doesn't take a scientific eye to note that Lombok is a very different place than its neighbor. Where Bali's interior is a rich interplay of rice paddies and rain forest, much of Lombok – particularly the south and east – is a canvas of savannah-like landscapes. If that doesn't strike a cord, the beaches definitely will: Lombok's coastline is by turns ruggedly dramatic and serenely picturesque, with curving bays of floury white sand, placid turquoise waters, and endless groves of coconut. Bali, eat your heart out.

Culturally, the islands are also distinctive. While Bali is predominantly Hindu, Islam is the main religion here, as it is throughout much of the Indonesian archipelago. But Lombok is an island of many layers. The majority of its people are Sasak, descendants of animist agriculturalists who converted to Islam in the 16th century. Many villagers in the north, however, practice a unique syncretic faith – Wektu Telu, or "result of three" – that blends animism, Hinduism, and Islam.

Local tour operators tout visits to traditional Sasak villages, though it has been noted that some of these settlements look suspiciously new and uninhabited – a case of tourism driving culture, perhaps. But the Sasak village of Segenter, on the northerly foothills of Mount Rinjani, is the real thing.

On our visit, we are shown around by Neng Sanom, a wiry old man who was born here but cannot tell me how old the village is. A quarter of little boys follow us with languid curiosity. Everyone else we see is sprawled on bamboo pavilions sheltering from the noonday heat.

Segenter is laid out in neat rows of mud-and-thatch houses and paddocks for cows and goats. Bundles of tinder are stacked against the walls; chili peppers, startling red against the village's monochrome shades, dry in the sun. Little seems to grow here. I inquire about some conspicuously modern houses topped with corrugated iron. "It's cheaper to build like that. The alang alang [thatch] has doubled in price and it's hard to find," Sanom tells me. "People buy it to roof villas in Bali – and now in Lombok, too."

According to Sanom, the village rarely sees more than one or two visitors in a day and most of these are stopping by en route to Senaru, the departure point for Rinjani treks. Senaru is just a 20 minute drive away, but the change in scenery is striking. As we steadily gain altitude, sparse bracken and stunted trees are replaced by palm trees and groves of bamboo. Though much drier than Bali, Lombok does have its own tropical hinterland, most of it on the southern and western slopes of Rinjani. With its cascading rice terraces and verdant slopes, the little hillside town of Tetebatu in central Lombok is as idyllic an anything Bali's interior can offer. For now, it is seldom visited and luxury here means hot water and a ceiling fan. But for those seeking to recapture the essence of a bygone Bali, this is about as close as you can get.

There are Balinese in Lombok too, for that matter. They make up as much as 10 to 15 percent of the island's three million inhabitants and are a legacy of the period of Balinese rule that extended from the early 1600s until 1894, when Dutch colonizers captured Lombok. Since the establishment of former Indonesian president Suharto's New Order government in 1966, Lombok has, like Bali, been relatively stable and free of conflict, though there has long been an ideological divide between the west, with its European, Balinese, and Chinese associations, and the lesser developed, lesser touristed east, which is much more homogeneously Muslim. The notable exception to this accord was the rioting of January 2000, when mobs attacked Christian churches and Chinese homes and businesses. Though no tourists were harmed, most fled as fast as they could to Bali, and visitor arrivals, already severely dented by the 1998 economic downturn, plummeted.

"No one came here after that for more than a year," says our driver, Ahmad Saopi, a native of Ampenan. "But we didn't start the riots, it was outsiders," he adds, echoing a widely held belief that the unrest was sparked by external agents provocateurs as part of a nationwide attempt to destabilize the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid.

Whoever may have been responsible, the effect was disastrous. Suddenly, "the resort island of Lombok" – hitherto unknown to most of the world – was international news, but under the worst possible circumstances but under the worst possible circumstance as far as tourism, its main source of income, was concerned. Plans to market Lombok as the new Bali, hatched by tourism authorities as far back as the 1980s, were put on hold. But only temporarily.

The thing about Lombok is that it's incredibly beautiful. Waking at 5:15 a.m. in one of the Tugu's lavish Bhagavat Gita suites, I leave my fiancée sleeping and traverse five meters of manicured grass to a deserted white-sand beach. To the east, the long ridges of Mount Rinjani are etched against a misty blue-and-mauve horizon; to the west, in the direction of Bali, the moon is setting. It's little wonder that investors and developers have been waiting so patiently in the wings. The Tugu, the Oberoi, and a nearby holiday villa called the Anandita may be the only high-end accommodations in Tanjung for now, but there's precious little real estate left in the area and these beaches will not remain deserted for long. Yet if a surge in tourism to Senggigi and Tanjung is imminent (everyone is proclaiming 2008 the island's best year since the mid-1990s), the immediate buzz seems to be taking place not on Lombok proper, but a few kilometers offshore.

THAT THE GILI ISLANDS ARE BOOMING is confirmed as soon as you step off the plane at Mataram's tiny domestic airport. The walls of the arrivals lounge are studded with posters advertising dive trips, beachside bars and restaurants, and villas. Gili means "little island" in the Sasak dialect, but when people talk about "the Gilis," they are referring specifically to the three tiny island just off Tanjung. And none is more popular than Gili Trawangan, a.k.a. Gili T, the largest of the group.

"I think we're turning into a suburb of Seminyak," says Foued Kadachi, a French-Tunisian dive instructor, photographer, and environmentalist who has lived on Trawangan for nine years. He's referring to Bali's hippest resort district and to Gili T's recent surge in tourism and villa development by would-be Robinson Crusoes intent on realizing dreams of paradise found. But the desert-island days were back in the '90s and Trawangan has already had its Crusoe. Simon Liddiard is an Englishman of the mad dogs variety who arrived here almost two decades ago, when the island's eight kilometers of immaculate coastline were populated by just a few ramshackle beach huts and the odd backpacker lost in a psilocybin stupor (in certain circles, the island is as famous for its magic mushrooms as it is for its diving). He decided to stay and now he's among Gili T's most influential residents.

"I hadn't planned to be here for more than a year or so, but in 1992 U started doing business with five local brothers. I set up the island's first dive operation and gradually started buying up tracts of land," the 40-year-old recalls as I tuck into a full English breakfast at his Blue Marlin Dive center, now the largest such outfit on Trawangan. Most "locals" are relatively recent arrivals themselves, descendants of the fearsome Bugis navigators from Sulawesi who harried both the Dutch and British fleets to distraction. These days, they prepare pizzas and pancakes and listen to a lot of reggae.

Liddiard has spearheaded not only Trawangan's dive scene (many competing operations were set up by his ex-employees), but also local conservation efforts – in 2001 he established the Gili Eco Trust, which exacts a surcharge from all divers for coral regeneration and protection programs. More recently, he built the first luxury accommodations on the island, Kelapa Villas.

"We're experiencing a villa revolution," Liddiard says, "but it's not the same as in Bali. Almost every beachfront plot has been sold, but here someone will buy 400 square meters and build on big private villa, whereas in Bali" – he jerks his thumb to the west – "you might have 20 units in an area like that." Kelapa Villa's 10 residences lie about a kilometer inland in a silent coconut grove (kelapa is Indonesian for coconut). Their modern, minimalist design, so familiar in Bali, is something of a novelty here, and all are crammed with amenities like iPod docks, fully fitted kitchens, and oversize LCD screens. Liddiard and a partner are now in the process of constructing a clubhouse and tennis court, clearly intent on creating a little lifestyle hub on the island.

Despite all the activity, it seems likely that Trawangan will retain at least something of the Swiss Family Robinson vibe that lured backpackers here in the first place; there are no motorized vehicles on any of the Gilis, and the single path that circumnavigates Trawangan can only be negotiated by foot, bicycle, or cidomo (horse-drawn carts). Nor are there any of the mangy creatures that pass for dogs in Bali, only cats, and particularly well-fed ones at that.

For our stay we choose a simple losmen (home stay) on the island's northeast coast, about a 10 minute bike ride from the main beach. We spend most of our time snorkeling the outlying coral garden, where turtles and giant trevally can be spotted among the more familiar reef.