



# Bali HIGHLIFE

*Luxury villas in Bali are now serious competitors to the island's resorts for holidaymakers travelling in groups, but how do you decide if a villa stay is right for you? Susan Borham and Lucy Jones report.*



Bali is the kind of place people visit and think, "I could live here," and so they build their dream holiday house with the distant hope they'll one day live permanently on the island. In the meantime, to help cover the costs of its staff and maintenance, it makes sense to make it available on the private villa rental market. With over 1,600 private villas now available for rent on the island, 10 per cent of them marketed as luxury, they've become serious competitors to the island's thriving luxury resort industry.

There are different views on the advantages of the one over the other but there's little doubt that compared to staying in a resort, leasing a luxury villa will get you more space, privacy and value for your money on a Bali holiday. With this in mind, and to better compete with the high-end resorts, the luxury villa management companies in Bali are attempting to make the villa experience as close as possible to a luxury resort experience in every way imaginable. Some villas, for example, make the distinction between a cook and a chef and for a little extra, will provide the services of a restaurant standard chef. In most luxury villas the staff manager will act as a concierge during your stay, facilitating your excursions from the villa to local restaurants, golf courses and other activities as well as by arranging in-villa visits by local yoga teachers and spa staff for on-site massages and beauty treatments.

Some villas have rooms purpose-built for this use in an attempt to bring it closer to a resort spa experience. Babysitting services can also be arranged for around US\$5 per hour and there are villas with fully equipped gyms.

Domestic staff clean and tidy throughout the day and some perform a turn down service in the evening. Some villas even provide a comprehensive range of luxury bathroom products.

## **VALUE FOR MONEY**

An average room rate in a luxury resort during peak season might be around US\$500 which is about US\$250 per head, per night. Often breakfast is included in that rate but after breakfast, you'll pay for most other things. If you have say eight people in your group, enough to fill a four bedroom villa, during peak season you'll pay around US\$200 per head per night. So you've already made a saving on the room rate but you'll get some extras as well.

Luxury villas have a staff of at least six whose services are included in the cost of the villa rental. Some of those people are around to look after the grounds and maintenance, the swimming pool and villa security but there'll always be at least one cook or chef, other domestic staff and possibly a driver.

At meal times you'll often only pay the local market cost of the ingredients for all of the meals you choose to eat at the villa during your stay. The same goes for beverages: alcoholic and non alcoholic. At the end of each day the staff will present you with a daily account including receipts of anything purchased that day on your behalf. The account is usually for a small amount, around say US\$10 per head if you don't drink very much alcohol (which by the way is heavily taxed in Indonesia and so is relatively expensive).

The domestic staff will also take care of your laundry on site returning clothes to your room washed, dried and folded or ironed and hung for either no extra charge or a small per garment charge. Sometimes a car and driver is included in the villa tariff, saving you about US\$50 for a half day use or, on the days you make use of it all day, US\$80. The arrangement at each villa varies slightly but, regardless of whether the villa has a dedicated car and driver, airport transfers for all of the guests are sometimes included in the villa rental rate. (Same goes for some luxury resorts.)

## **SPACE AND PRIVACY**

The average size of a four-bedroom luxury villa is around 550 square metres in built area on a land size of around 1,000 square metres. No resort can offer you the extravagance of space a private luxury villa offer.

## NOW FOR THE DISADVANTAGES

When you book a room at one of the international brand resorts, you can have some confidence that the resort is interested in protecting the reputation of its brand. That means that if you're staying at a Four Seasons for example, high standards are met in staff training and this will be reflected in the delivery of service during your stay. You can also expect a high standard of maintenance of the resort's facilities. You don't have the same assurances when you rent a private villa. Luxury villa tenants have reported significant events like no hot water for a half day (it having been depleted by morning showers), very poor water pressure generally and a collapse of broadband service delivery.

And on the topic of broadband service, many of the luxury villas have WiFi and it's often free, but the speed is sometimes slowish compared to the five-star resorts.

The staff at the villa you choose may be highly trained and motivated to make your stay trouble free and relaxing, or depending on the culture created by the manager, may be more interested in giving the appearance of being helpful while actually offering as little help as they can manage to get away with. (In Bali, as with everywhere else in the world, the expectation of an appropriate tip - between US\$20 and US\$50 for each guest - at the end of your stay can go a long way toward enhancing the general mood of the staff.)

Some of these problems can begin to be addressed by choosing a villa that is managed by a reputable villa management and marketing company with a brand it has spent some money promoting internationally and wishes to protect. In that case, you can be more confident maintenance standards will be high and a certain level of staff training has been undertaken.

A common, perhaps unavoidable problem is the standard of artwork adorning the walls and throughout even luxury villas. As a guest of the villa you're subject to the taste and budget of the villa owner. In international brand, luxury resorts the art has been sensitively selected by interior designers to be benign enough not to offend a very wide range of guest sensibilities, as well as to be of a certain aesthetic standard. Local market art is a common choice for luxury villas in Bali and the standards of the local artists varies there as it does anywhere.

If the wall decorations don't irritate you, the sounds, smells and noises of locals living, working and performing ceremonies nearby might. Private villas are often set in local neighbourhoods and so their residents may be subject to the smoke from paddy fields being burnt off, or the loud mechanical noises from the harvesting equipment or the banging sounds of the scarecrows in the breeze, designed to protect their crops.

Bali's luxury resorts on the other hand, are generally set within extensive grounds that act as a buffer zone between guests on holidays and locals going about their daily lives. In fact, where there's any threat to the sanctuary of a luxury resort, the general managers have been known to quickly lean upon their carefully cultivated relationships with local leaders to have the situation resolved or avoided. But while peace and serenity is preserved for the guests, this

practise might also contribute to the quarantined, culture-less feeling resorts these days try so very hard, in so many different ways, to address.

At one private luxury villa in Bali, from across the rainforest, we listened for an entire day into the evening and the early hours of the following morning, as a village leader on a hand-held loudspeaker prepared the locals for a once-in-every-five-years village cremation ceremony; his haunting half singing, half speaking was achingly beautiful. Our villa manager invited us, on behalf of his community, to attend the ceremony and some of our group went along. They described it as one of the most moving events of their lives and they felt privileged to have been included. An opportunity like this is unlikely to have arisen at a resort. Here are seven private villas in Bali.

## *Pushpapuri*

**Rates:** US\$750 (about A\$745) per night in low season to US\$950 (about A\$944) per night in peak season. All rates are subject to a 5% service charge and 10% VAT.

**Sleeps:** up to eight adults.

The absolute beachfront, four-bedroom Villa Pushpapuri is near the traditional village of Ketewel on Bali's south-east coast.

From the villa's living areas (and some bedrooms), guests enjoy one of Bali's finest views across the ocean towards the beaches of Keramas and the islands of Nusa Penida and Nusa Lembongan and taking in Mount Agung.

Villa Pushpapuri is designed in a traditional Balinese pavilions style where rooms have separate pavilions that are placed around a central courtyard, maximizing light and views.

The accommodation arrangements include a living and dining pavilion, a games room (with pool table), a two-storey master suite with a jacuzzi, an upstairs study and a DVD room. All of the guest bedrooms are airconditioned with ensembles. There's also a 20-metre swimming pool and for surfers, there's a popular surf beach nearby.

Meal arrangements are by the "market price" system and there's a small extra charge for laundry. [marketingvillas.com](http://marketingvillas.com)