

Bali's Best KEPT SECRET

DISCOVER THE WAY BALI USED TO BE BEFORE
THE TOURISTS AT NUSA PENIDA.

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There is something unbelievably exciting about the idea of racing around a remote Indonesian island on a motorbike – passing through local villages, stumbling across deserted beaches and encountering breathtaking vistas.

Coming from America I can't help but view riding on a scooter as an incredibly thrilling and quintessentially Indonesian travel experience. It was this line of thinking that lured me to Nusa Penida, a Balinese island that boasts a myriad of natural wonders and also happens to be the perfect place to explore on two wheels.

Nusa Penida sits 20 kilometers off the southeastern coast of Bali. It is so close to the mainland that it only takes 30 minutes to reach by fast boat. Yet despite its proximity to the tourist meccas of Seminyak, Kuta and Sanur, Nusa Penida has somehow managed to stay off of the tourist radar.

When I first spotted the rugged

little island from my boat, I marveled at the fact that all it took was a few minutes to be transported from Sanur's tourist-clogged beach to a sleepy fishing village. Nusa Penida might technically be a part of Bali, but the difference was immediately apparent.

In contrast to the crowded beaches and mega-hotels that dot Bali's shores, Nusa Penida's coastline was fringed with a forest of giant palm trees and modest, thatch-roofed homes. The shallow ocean water was sectioned off with nets and large piles of red, yellow and purple seaweed sat on the beach, drying in the tropical heat.

I would soon find out that most of the island's inhabitants still make their living harvesting and selling these slimy tendrils. Unlike Bali, which has a tourist-based economy, Nusa Penida's residents depend on these crops to make their living. The seaweed is grown on the island and sold to countries like China and Japan to make a multitude of



THOSE WHO TAKE THE TIME TO VISIT NUSA PENIDA WILL BE REWARDED WITH QUAIN BALINESE VILLAGES, ORNATE TEMPLES, HIDDEN WATERFALLS & NATURAL SWIMMING HOLES, PLUS AN OTHERWORLDLY COASTLINE.

products, from cosmetics to ice cream.

Life on Nusa Penida is simple, a far cry from the hustle and bustle of the mainland. It felt much like what Bali must have been like 40 years ago, before it caught the attention of international visitors in the 1970s.

That said, Nusa Penida is by no means a secret. It is, after all, located a short 10-minute boat ride from Nusa Lembongan and Nusa Ceningan, both of which are currently experiencing a tourist boom. Regardless, most visitors who do venture to Nusa Penida do so to swim with giant manta rays or explore the pristine coral reefs that skirt the island. Very few visitors ever step foot on the island itself.

Those who do take the time to visit Nusa Penida will be rewarded with quaint Balinese villages and ornate temples, hidden waterfalls and natural swimming holes, and an otherworldly coastline where huge waves crash violently against the island's sheer cliffs. Nusa Penida also happens to be home to some of the friendliest locals I've ever encountered.

Because of the island's large size – it measures roughly 200 square kilometers – Nusa Penida's attractions are most easily reached with a motorized vehicle. The hotel manager told us about the prime beaches, lookout points and waterfalls that we simply had to see.

We promptly rented two scooters and with nothing but a crude map in hand we sped off toward our first destination, Crystal Bay.

It took about 30 minutes before we approached the turnoff for Crystal Bay. The road leading up to the cove was surrounded by endless rows of palms, which towered 10 meters above my head, creating a stunning backdrop to the beach. The bay itself was a lengthy crescent of white sand and the water shimmered with every shade of blue imaginable.

There was no one around aside from a few fishermen and a small tour group, presumably there to snorkel at the bay's

incredible reef. We spotted a temple at the top of one of the sheer cliffs that bookend the cove. It's possible to walk up hundreds of steep stairs to reach it, but given the stifling April heat Eric and I decided to continue on our journey and cool off in the natural swimming pools at Temeling Waterfall instead.

As we careened through the lush interior we encountered amazing viewpoints around every turn. I found it tough to keep my eyes focused on the road as we glided past the island's emerald green rice patties and the rolling hills that were framed by the ocean in the distance.

It turned out that our map wasn't completely accurate, and we quickly became lost. We pulled over to the side of the road to study our map and figure out where we'd made a wrong turn. Almost instantaneously three girls, donning their school uniforms, pulled up next to us and eagerly offered to show us the way.

After 10 minutes and a series of complicated turns they pointed us toward the entrance to the waterfall. With huge smiles, they waved enthusiastically as they sped off toward their village. Eric and I got lost a dozen more times that afternoon and each time local villagers offered to show us the way, each person friendlier than the last.

Because we visited Nusa Penida during the tail end of the wet season, the waterfall



WHEEL DEAL

My boyfriend Eric and I checked into the Ring Sameton Inn, one of the few hotels on the island. With scant Internet and no nightlife to speak of, there were no distractions from our surroundings.

We spent that first evening enjoying each other's company and going on a lengthy stroll along the beach. We watched as a storm rolled in from the mainland, turning the sky a charcoal gray and erasing Bali's massive volcanos from the horizon.

That night we were lulled to sleep by the sound of the rain pattering against the rooftop and sporadic thunder rumbling through the island's mountainous interior.

By the next morning there was no evidence of the previous night's deluge. The sky was a brilliant blue, painted with billowing white clouds. It was the perfect day to do some exploring.





IF YOU GO...

WHERE TO STAY: I stayed at the Ring Sameton Inn and highly recommend it. Rooms are clean and spacious. The grounds are beautiful and there is a large swimming pool. Management can help to arrange anything you need, including snorkeling and diving excursions. The rate is \$50 per night (phone: +62-821-4676-3612 or +62-813-37985141; website: ringsameton-nusapenida.com).

GETTING THERE: From Sanur, I booked a ticket using Maruti Express. The ride took roughly 30 minutes and cost Rp 250,000 to reach the island and Rp 150,000 to return.

RENTING A MOTORBIKE: I arranged to rent a scooter through my hotel, Ring Sameton Inn. The cost was Rp 50,000. It is also possible to ask around at the pier. The cost will likely be a bit higher, figure around Rp 90,000.

was more like a stream. But the pools were chilly and offered a refreshing reprieve from the midday heat.

There was not a soul in sight – aside from the curious macaque monkeys that peered down from the branches above us – and we had the place all to ourselves. The crystal clear lagoons were set directly on a rock-studded beach and were surrounded by steep sandstone cliffs and the vibrant jungle. It felt as if we were on our own private island.

We managed to wile away a couple of hours at the lagoons before it was time to head back to our hotel. As we made the journey back we passed through a handful of local villages and were greeted by excited children at virtually every home we passed.

In an effort to get our attention, the neighborhood kids would run to the street, while waving manically and mustering all of their energy to shout, “*Bule!* Hello! Hello!”

Because my motorbiking skills aren’t up to standard I was too scared to lift my hand off of the handle bar to wave back. But after seeing the look of disappointment on the first few children’s faces, I quickly gained the confidence to return the gesture and was rewarded with big, gap-tooth smiles, choruses of laughter and gleeful jumps up and down.

Nusa Penida is bursting with natural beauty but it was the simple and traditional way of life and the warmth of the local people that made this Balinese island truly special. For me, Nusa Penida was the authentic Bali that I had searched so desperately for in Kuta and Ubud, but failed to find.

Nusa Penida might sit in plain sight, right off the coast of Bali. It might not be a secret, but it sure did feel like one to me. 🇮🇩

