

# THE W A K A EXPERIENCE



*"Could you go to Bali, Nick?" said Craig, Audley's Managing Director. One aspect of my job involves travelling to exotic tropical islands and then immersing myself in luxury, just to test it out for you, our clients. "It's a dirty job, but..."*

So off we went, Isabel (our Indonesia Specialist) and I, destined for Denpasar. Now I am not going to pretend for a second that it was a chore, it wasn't. However, after many similar trips to the East, let's just say my excitement has become a little jaded? I'm sure you appreciate that one hotel can begin to look like any other hotel. I have become adept at distinguishing which hotels are ideal for Audley travellers; distinctive local character, uncompromised comfort and elegance (which can also be reflected in the service), a hotel situated where I would want to

be if I was on holiday, close to the action or gloriously secluded.

Perhaps it is easier to define that the type of hotels we like are not the type that are principally designed to 'shift numbers' in tourism's mass-market herd mentality. Here at Audley, we like a smaller, more intimate atmosphere, where you truly immerse yourself in a hotel which compliments the country you find yourself in, something truly unique and special.

Luckily, over the years, I have found many such hotels throughout Asia, but rarely is it that I find a chain

of hotels meeting all of my criteria all of the time. The Indonesian owned network of Waka hotels in Bali are the realisation of this, our concept. On discovery, I felt almost aggrieved, as if they were two steps ahead of me, taking my own blueprint for the perfect resort hotel and then applying it to a paradise island.

The Waka properties have the feel of private residencies, almost making them 'anti-hotel'. They only ever have a maximum of 17 bungalows in any one of their eight Waka resorts dotted around Bali and each has an air of exclusivity borne out of its intimacy.



Whilst poking my nose around the ever so deliberately, slightly overgrown landscaped grounds of each Waka Resort, it was as though the residents were members of some hidden society.

I was jealous of them and their 'secret' that distinguished them from the tourists elsewhere on the island, in retrospect the ultimate accolade.

Of the resorts, two can only be accessed by boat. Waka Nusa, is on a sun drenched beach on Lembongan Island and Waka Shorea is in Barat National Park on the islands' remote north west corner. In both instances, elegance and comfort are nestled on secluded crystal clear waters, well away from the big hotels.

Ubud, Bali's cultural mecca in the consistently stunning scenery of the lush valleys of the interior, is accessed by Waka Barung, a pocket of tranquillity in the heart of the town, or alternatively by Waka di Ume, among the paddy fields just outside of town. Waka de Abian, a small countryside resort is also within striking distance of Ubud, but is to be treated as a self-contained retreat due to its glorious isolation perched on a hilltop in the hinterland.

The beaches of south Bali are home to the Waka Maya, close to the commercial hub of Kuta and Sanur Beach. The most unconventional of all is the Waka Gangga, on a quiet western beach backed by paddy fields, quite literally in the middle of a nowhere, but close enough to Bali's principal temple, Tanah Lot to be able to enjoy the cultural side of Bali too.

*I was jealous of them and their 'secret' that distinguished them from tourists elsewhere.*

Not content with simply offering accommodation, the Waka 'group' also organise day cruises on their own 23 metre catamaran 'Waka Louka'; starlight dinner cruises on the Benoa Sakti; expeditions by Landrover into Bali's lush interior; diving off Menjangan Island; and day treks up Puncak Tedung, deep in the Balinese countryside. Each resort has a Waka Sutra health spa, offering traditional Balinese massage and all kinds of rejuvenating treatments.

That is, if the ambience and laid back surroundings of the resorts have not already done the trick .

My re-introduction to Bali was indelibly flavoured by the 'Waka' experience. However, it is only fair to point out that the Waka resorts are not for all, and indeed, nor should they ever try to be. They don't have the clinical presentation adhered to by the international exponents of a five star resort. They are, dare I say it, a little wacky!

It is a personal affliction, but I fell in love with Bali all over again, and I fell in love with this quirky low-key collection of small resort hotels. And for this, I suppose I ought to thank our new friends at Waka, for reminding me that I do indeed have the best job in the world!

#### Travel File

Tours of Bali staying in Waka hotels can be tailor-made to your specifications. A 14-night trip staying at the Waka Shorea in the north, Waka di Uma in Ubud and Waka Maya in Sanur costs from £1,395 per person including international flights, transfers and breakfasts. For further details call us on 01869 276 231