

Understand Bali & Lombok

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Almost four million punters turn up annually: what does this mean for the islands?

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Bali & Lombok Today

Can you love a place to death? That's the question being asked more and more on Bali. As visitor numbers continue to soar like a kite over Sanur more than a few people are wondering if the island has finally reached the saturation point. From the ever-worse traffic to the proposal to fill in Benoa Bay (Teluk Benoa) for a tourist city, the ramifications of the island's popularity are all around.

Best on Film

Act of Killing (director Joshua Oppenheimer, 2013) A searing documentary about the 1965 slaughter of accused Communist sympathisers in Indonesia (including tens of thousands on Bali).

Cowboys in Paradise (director Amit Virmani, 2011) Enjoyable documentary about the scores of male gigolos working in south Bali.

Best in Print

Island of Bali (Miguel Covarrubias, 1937) The classic work about Bali and its civilisation.

Bali Soul Journals (Clare McAlaney, 2013) Written by a Bali expat and lavishly illustrated, it looks for Bali's soul today.

Bali Daze: Freefall Off the Tourist Trail (Cat Wheeler, 2011) Daily life in Ubud makes for an illuminating romp.

Secrets of Bali: Fresh Light on the Morning of the World (Jonathan Copeland and Ni Wayan Murni, 2010) A fun read about Bali and its people.

Eat, Pray, Love (Elizabeth Gilbert, 2007) This bestseller (and movie) lures believers to Bali every year.

Bye-Bye Bay

Right now, if you drive on the elevated toll road linking Sanur to Nusa Dua, you'll get sweeping views of the mangroves ringing the shallow bay. Five of Bali's polluted rivers empty through these forests and this ecosystem is vital for filtering out the trash and some of the pollutants.

The proposed Benoa Bay reclamation project would potentially devastate the bay and mangroves. A consortium backed by powerful Indonesian developers wants to build a network of 12 artificial islands (there's no word on where all the landfill would be obtained for this) in what's now the open waters you see from the toll road. A whole slew of projects would then follow, including a theme park, golf course and Formula One race course, plus countless condos, resorts and malls. Only a few channels would remain so that the river water could still flow out into the ocean, although it would no longer benefit much in the way of mangrove filtering.

After decades of being knocked around by developers and offering little protest, the Balinese are up in arms over the Benoa Bay project, which has touched a real nerve. First, there's the 70 Hindu holy sites that would be affected. Second, the island already had a nascent environmental movement as people are increasingly fed up with once pure rivers turning into toxic cesspools filled with trash. And third, there's a growing Bali nationalism that has been fueled by the perception that outsiders (primarily the well-connected from Jakarta) are getting rich off the island and leaving just a few crumbs for the locals.

Starting in 2015 and continuing right through 2016, protests have grown larger and louder. Anti-reclamation, pro-Balinese-pride banners from groups such as Tolak Reklamasi (Reject Reclamation), Bali Not for Sale (www.facebook.com/balinotforsale) and ForBali (www.forbali).