



Dip a toe in the water

A tropical Eden awaits visitors heading back to Bali, reports MIKE SMITH

It's late afternoon by the time I make my way to the beach from the privacy of the thatched-roof holiday villa. The black sands of Seminyak are almost free of guests as the sun turns a spectacular deep red.

In the distance, the figure of a lone surfer is silhouetted against the changing sky, paddling out for one last wave before nightfall.

At the other end of the sands, a small group of holidaymakers take their hired horses on a final gallop through the shallows.

It's a far more peaceful scene than I expected, and illustrates the devastating impact of the bombings on the lives of the Balinese.

Just as I ready myself for a snap of the sunset, a hawkler approaches hoping to sell the pieces of jewellery draped over his arms. "It's your lucky day," he insists with all the energy of a used car salesman. "I have a special bargain for you, sir."

After capturing the moment through the lens, we chat, not so much about the jewellery, but more about the gaping wounds terrorism has left on Bali and its people.

As with most Balinese, the hawkler has suffered financially, and judging by the tranquil surrounds of a once-bustling beach, he isn't alone. "This beach has never been so quiet," he says. "There are no longer big crowds. Not much business for me, either."

Although down on luck, the man smiles and speaks optimistically of a future that he hopes will result in Australians flocking back in bigger numbers. "We only hope," I reply before obligingly buying a necklace and returning to the equally empty Sofitel Seminyak.

Few footprints are left on the volcanic dark sands, but I return home with a sense the hawkler's predictions may one day come true.

Those feelings gained strength this week when eight small Bali hotels and resorts rallied to launch a multi-million rupiah online promotion to kick-start tourism from Australia.

It's a tongue-in-cheek copy of the successful Tourism Australian Lara Bingle campaign that asks: "Where The Bali Hell Are You?"

At last count, the promo attracted 100,000-plus hits worldwide to its website, prompting Australian Tourism Minister Fran Bailey to respond: "Imitation is the highest form of flattery."

With the backing of holiday bargains packaged by airline Garuda Indonesia and hotel chain Accor, only time will tell if we return to our "second home".

Some Australians didn't actually leave Bali, among them renowned Sydney chef Will Meyrick. At 29, the Portuguese-born, Scottish-bred Meyrick took over the reins at the Sofitel's main open-air Husk restaurant, creating a contemporary Thai-style cuisine with such dishes as green curry of barramundi and crispy duck.

He once worked at the multi-award-winning Longrain Asian restaurant in Sydney's Surry Hills before opening Bamboo, then the Tasting Room and Jimmy Liks, where he was head chef.

Before the bombings, Seminyak — about a 15-minute drive from the main tourist mecca of Kuta — drew large crowds for its fashionable shops along Jl Raya. By night, it was the chic restaurant and bar scene along Jl Oberoi (or Eat Street) and Jl Dhyana Pura (Eat and Drink Street) that drew partying guests.

Without the crowds, though, it proves easy for our group to grab a table without a booking, with tables galore at such popular outdoor restaurants as Le Spot, which is an arm of the Western-style mini supermarket, Bali Deli.

Almost anything from baguettes filled with all kinds of delicacies to curries are served, and with a glass of beer or wine, the bill is no more

than \$10 each.

For accommodation, it isn't hard to book a couple of nights at the grand yet tastefully designed and decorated Balinese-style Sofitel Seminyak hugging 4.5ha of Seminyak Beach. Here, guests can stay in a lavishly spacious royal villa or in one of the upgraded deluxe and superior garden villas at prices that won't burn a hole in the pocket.

At the top end are the individual villas, lavishly spacious with either an outdoor jacuzzi or pool, set in tropical gardens. Within the hotel's main complex is a series of more affordable guest rooms and suites catering to families and couples.

Dinner at the retreat's teppanyaki-style Japanese restaurant is a highlight, as is an hour or two of Balinese pampering inside the beautifully appointed Namaya Spa. If you can tear yourself away from Seminyak, another spot worth considering is south, at the end of a 4km-long peninsula from Nusa Dua.

Here, the village of Benoa is home to the Novotel Bali Tanjung Benoa, which has a small number of modern — and very private — Balinese-style luxury villas.

Looking across to the reef from a normally windy Tanjung Benoa Beach, the hotel is in the perfect spot for guests to sit back and relax in relative peace with the large villas having all the mod cons of home plus more, many in the open air.

Guests can shower or bathe outdoors, even watch TV in an outdoor pavilion. And if you want to entertain a few friends, the villas have enough garden space to do so — before or after dinner.

A small, private swimming pool is positioned in the corner of one of the villas, privacy guaranteed by a wall made from white rock quarried from the island's coastal cliffs.

With so much on offer, you can understand Bali's cries of: "Where The Bali Hell Are You?"

□ The writer was a guest of Accor, flying Garuda Indonesia.



Calm future ... tranquility beckons guests to the pool at the Novotel Bali Tanjung Benoa

WONKNOW

Getting there: Garuda Indonesia Sydney to Denpasar.

Currency: \$A1 = 7500 rupiahs.

Entry: Visa required. \$US25 paid on entry into Bali.

Packages: Accor/Garuda Indonesia/Bali On Any Budget deals of four nights from \$760pp, twin share at All Seasons Legian,

with airfare ex-Sydney. Four-night air-inclusive packs from \$855 (Mercure Kuta), \$859 (Mercure Sanur), \$945 (Novotel Bali, Tanjung Benoa) and \$1015 (Sofitel Seminyak). Add \$259pp for Australian taxes and airport charges.

Details: balionanybudget.com.au