



BALI

NORTHERN STAR

A former fishing village in Bali's far north pulls off an impressive balancing act, combining scenic beauty with top-class amenities for the few tourists who make it there. **Jonathan Evans** makes Pemuteran his home for a week to discover all that it has to offer



or decades now, tourism in Bali has clustered around well-trodden pockets towards the south of the Island of the Gods. That's hardly surprising, given the location of the airport and the significant traffic bottlenecks around it – even getting to the cultural centre of Ubud can take a couple of hours, while reaching Bali's northernmost towns takes up to five hours from Ngurah Rai International Airport. Now, the Indonesian government has approved construction of a second Bali airport in Buleleng regency, thus heralding a new dawn for tourism in the north.

While the estimated completion date remains six years away (construction is only commencing in 2020), the new airport is a mouthwatering prospect for hoteliers and restaurateurs in the area, who for years have settled for a transient clientele en route to West Bali National Park and its world-class diving mecca, Menjangan island.

But one village right on the doorstep of these attractions has already emerged as a fully fledged destination in its own right. Lying between lush mountains on one side and a volcanic black-sand beach on the other, Pemuteran has evolved from a modest fishing village into a northern equivalent to Sanur – a cosy, classy base drawing a slightly mature crowd that's retained its homespun charm through conscious, low-rise development.

PHOTOGRAPHY SUMBERKIMA HILL



ROOMS WITH A VIEW

When I first visited Pemuteran in 2016, it was a solid, if unspectacular, stopover between the minor tourist town of Lovina and the national park – like Tulamben and Amed on the east coast, a favourite haunt of the diving enthusiasts, though still a work in progress. Now, after a rapid spate of gentrification, a fresh influx of spas, boutique hotels, and eateries have significantly broadened the appeal of this peaceful village. Pemuteran's new

cosmopolitanism is crystallised at Kinaara Resort & Spa, whose distinctive Lombok- and Sulawesi-style huts centre around an emerald pool which uses water from the nearby hot spring. The hotel comes with a heartening backstory: after an electrical fire damaged six cabins in 2017, it was redeveloped and back in operation within a year. As you venture into the frangipani-strewn garden and gaze at the verdant hillsides, Kinaara is one of the best vantage points to soak up the inspiring local scenery.

Old-school seafront hotels such as Matahari Beach Resort once ruled the roost here, but stayover options have notably diversified. Visitors can now unwind at homestays on bucolic backroads or sink back at secluded gems such as Sun Suko Boutique Retreat and Sumberkima Hill – intimate properties that combine colourful contemporary artworks, chi-chi design, and marvellous mountain vistas.

The more established hotels here even offer a tempting range of features. Taruna Boutique Homestay and Man's Cottages have redeveloped, shifting their restaurants – which once faced the

ABOVE:

Plush four-poster beds and colourful local fabrics adorn Sun Suko Boutique Retreat.

LEFT:

Sun Suko's backroad location affords fine vistas across to the mountains.

main road of Jalan Singaraja-Gilimanuk – to ornate alfresco spaces bordering the beach. Taruna's Gianyar-based winery, Sababay, complements its forward-thinking menu, and waitstaff invite you to sample excellent Balinese cuisine such as coconut chicken curry, which comes with a free *arak* (local cocktail drink) apéritif.

Six-year-old Taman Selini now adjoins Warung Selini, a restaurant set in a beachfront field whose hip, contemporary feel is closer to Seminyak than the traditional north-west. Pemuteran's only white-sand beach fringes the neatly manicured lawns of Taman Sari Resort.



STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

Pleasures to cater to all tastes in Pemuteran.



Warung Tirta Sari

This attractive restaurant set in a *pondok* (hut) dishes up grilled Balinese specialties, with seafood prominent on the menu.

📍 *Buleleng Regency*

Joe's Baresto

A pretension-free party shack, this boozy joint offers live music and a garden behind the bar.

📍 *Jalan Seririt-Gillimanuk*

The Prana

This spacious coffee shop strikes a harmonious balance between contemporary and classical.

📍 *Buleleng Regency*

Bali Balance Café and Bistro

Healthy dining options and delicious desserts to enjoy in the rear garden.

📍 *balibalance*

Juvenex Spa & Salon

Opened in late 2017, Juvenex has become the locale of choice for haircuts, massages, and pedicures in an on-trend standalone hut.

📍 *juvenexbali.com*

ABOVE:
Stunning views of the sunset await at Sumberkima Hill.

CIRCLE:
Warung Setia dishes up the tastiest *gado-gado* in town.

BELOW:
Comfort food served with a smile at Warung Selini.

A QUESTION OF TASTE

In Pemuteran, quality cuisine extends well beyond hotel kitchens. Frangipani Bar & Restaurant spearheads the town's fine-dining options in a beautiful two-storey villa, serving up grilled favourites and seafood such as dolphinfish or tuna alongside Balinese *rijsttafel* – a Dutch colonial-era banquet combining satay, ribs, curry, and salad. While the food, soothing ambience, and tranquil alleyway setting speak for themselves, it's the personal service that seals the deal; the owner even picked me up at my hotel and drove me back there afterwards.

But perhaps the greatest gustatory surprise in the new Pemuteran is Warung Setia which opened in 2017 – an unassuming roadside shack that offers a full complement of Indo classics at remarkably low prices and is permanently packed, even in low season. I consider myself something of a connoisseur – or at the very least, a

veteran – when it comes to Indonesian food, but the *gado-gado* (steamed vegetables, soybean cake, egg, potato, and peanut sauce) I tasted here was little short of sensational. Warung Setia also serves *kalu-kalu*, a local seafood speciality.

Part of Pemuteran's allure is that almost all its key venues follow a virtually straight line through the village – along with convenience stores, a post office, souvenir stalls, and watersports rental outlets – making the act of choosing your next café, bar, or spa an exercise in simplicity. The intimate, laid-back nature of the area, which is pleasingly devoid of mega-malls or chain stores, lends itself equally well to striking up acquaintances at bijou hotels or eateries, or chatting with locals on the black-sand beach.



RIGHT:
Metal frames
surround coral
formations at
Pemuteran's Biorock
restoration area.

CIRCLE:
The reef around
Menjangan island
holds a rich diversity
of marine species,
including clownfish.



REEF ENCOUNTER

The fertile, coral-rich waters of the Bali Sea are the village's *raison d'être* and the key to its future survival. On a national level, it's known as the venue for the annual, four-day Pemuteran Bay Festival (see sidebar), which since 2015 has served up northern Bali's most colourful celebration of arts and culture while also promoting the Buleleng coast as a model for best practices in marine conservation. Festival activities on offer include beach clean-ups, underwater art parades, and reef-protection workshops.

The restoration of Pemuteran's world-class reef using Biorock technology – reinvigorating the ecosystem through the placement of electrically charged steel frames – has paid huge dividends. When Indonesia's economy nosedived in the late 1990s, locals resorted to dynamite fishing, and El Niño further bleached the coral, spelling an environmental disaster. Under the award-winning, community-based foundation Karang Lestari, Pemuteran became the site of one of the world's largest two reef-restoration projects (the other is in Lombok's Gili islands). Responsible tourism flourished, and diving specialists like Nemo Divers Bali now line the streets of this former fishing village.

Even for those not accustomed to watersports, the underwater world lying just a short paddle from the shore of mushroom-shaped

Menjangan Island casts a dizzying spell. As Wayan – a long-haired dive leader from the Nemo company – headed down into the warm abyss, I overcame my irrational fear of snorkelling and was mesmerised by the perfect, cavernous reef, teeming with an extraordinary array of fish. If you're not taking the plunge (though, believe me, you really should), Menjangan's small population of endearingly tame muntjac deer – from which the island takes its name – make friendly company as you size up the views across the sapphire bay.

My joints aching from the choppy 20-minute boat ride back to the mainland, I opted for a massage. As if to underscore Pemuteran's mission to become the complete Balinese seaside community, spas are now a prominent fixture of the village – and there's no better way to re-energise after a Menjangan submersion than to undergo an expert kneading at Widhy's Spa, a session so soothing I simply didn't want it to end.

There's little Pemuteran lacks these days – except, perhaps, more tourists. But the way things are heading, a prosperous future seems all but guaranteed for this beautiful northern Balinese village. 💰

THE SHAPE OF WATER



From 3 to 6 October, Bali celebrates its fifth annual **Pemuteran Bay Festival** where the agenda is as much on environmental awareness as on culture and entertainment. "It's getting better each year," says Australian Chris Brown, the eco-warrior owner of Reef Seen Divers Resort, who in 1991 became the first Westerner to move to the village. "[Activities include] traditional dancing, cleaning up litter, and protecting the environment. I hold a school band competition to get more people involved." While the colourful event showcases all kinds of artistic endeavours, it ultimately aims to continue the work that's been done in recent years to keep the reef sustainable and spread the eco-gospel. Looking at Pemuteran's current renaissance, it seems to be succeeding admirably.

📱 pemuteranbayfest.com



Scoot
flies to Bali daily.
Book your flights at
flyscoot.com