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Home > Southeast Asia > Indonesia > Bali

Close to Bali, worlds apart



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Bird's eye view ... sunset at Nusa Penida. Photo: Getty Images

SHARE Only an hour from the crowds, George Mills finds a sense of purpose among the voluntourists on sleepy Nusa Penida.

In a nation bursting at the seams with tropical paradises, the Indonesian island of Nusa Penida barely registers. There are no boutique hotels here, internet connections are a rarity and despite periodic, half-hearted rumours of impending tourism development, this place doesn't feel as if it's about to become the next Ibiza or Koh Phangan. Or the next anywhere, really.

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Instead, Nusa Penida – an hour by ferry from Bali's east coast – is a resolutely sleepy world of coconut groves and seaweed farms. This is part of Bali's Klungkung province but the contrast between the mainland region and its diminutive offshore dependency could hardly be greater. On Nusa Penida, the pace of life is dictated by the tides and the seasons.

For Mike Appleton, a long-term volunteer with Indonesia's non-profit Friends of the National Park Foundation, it was love at first sight. "This is a very special place," the spry Englishman in his 60s says, "and the people are very much the centre of it."

I'm at the foundation's offices near the temple village of Ped. From the porch, I can make out the supine forms of two men dozing on a raised bamboo platform. Nearby, a group of children are playing football; a goat ambles among the players, unconcerned. From here the foundation runs its projects, chief among them a program to increase wild populations of several critically endangered birds.

The project is the result of sustained effort

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by Indonesian conservationist Bayu Wirayudha. He took up the birds' cause when it became clear a mainland project to boost the wild population of the Bali starling was failing. The starlings, Bali's emblem animal, are highly prized for their beauty and can fetch huge prices on the black market. Whenever they were released on the mainland, poachers simply recaptured them.

So Bayu, a vet by training, turned his attention to rugged Nusa Penida, which is 15 kilometres from Bali and beyond the usual flying range of non-migratory birds. The conservationist spent two years travelling to the island and talking to the island's 41 village chiefs. They agreed that any birds released on Nusa Penida by the foundation would be fully protected by the villagers under awig-awig, the local form of customary law.

The project has been a runaway success. Despite potential difficulties, including a lack of law enforcement, bird numbers on the island are rising. Even better, the original agreement covering Bali starlings has been extended to cover all birds and Nusa Penida is now an unofficial bird sanctuary.

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This unofficial status is just how the foundation likes it. In a country struggling with corruption, any agreement built on goodwill and backed by community leaders has a head start.

In exchange for the birds' protection, the foundation supports communities on Nusa Penida through a range of social and environmental projects. "They delivered their part of the bargain," Appleton says of the islanders, "and now we're busy delivering ours."

Among the foundation's contributions is a scholarship that pays the school fees of one child from every village and two students are being supported through university. Then there is the work of volunteers based at the foundation's centre.

This volunteer program was boosted recently by AusAID's new Australian Volunteers for International Development program. During my stay, visitors – including families – from Australia, England and Germany are busy monitoring birds, tending seedlings and giving English lessons to the local children, who treat the foundation's site as a second home.

The foundation runs a popular tree nursery, which islanders are free to raid at will. Appleton is particularly excited about a model organic vegetable garden he's developing. The soil is poor on Nusa Penida and most fresh produce is shipped from the Balinese mainland. The foundation hopes mulching and composting techniques can transform farming habits, improve nutrition and provide an alternative revenue stream to the seaweed industry.

Foundation volunteers are generally asked to contribute four hours a day and to stay at least a week, but many people find it difficult to move on. "I was supposed to leave yesterday," Lauren, from the US, says "but now I don't know if I'll ever be able to tear myself away."

It's easy to understand this desire to linger. Life on Nusa Penida is simple, the people are relaxed and friendly and the temperature is uniformly pleasant in the dry season. And there is the satisfaction that comes with being involved in a worthwhile project.

"I wanted a holiday," Gwyneth, from London, says. "But I wanted to do something useful as well. And it's been great."

Bayu says visitors to the foundation can see how conservation is being integrated with community development and can experience a traditional form of Balinese culture.

Indeed, touring Nusa Penida is an old-school adventure. Away from the main coastal routes, road signs are in short supply, which brings happy surprises. A lunch stop in the breezy hill town of Klumpu becomes an event when villagers sidle up to check what the foreigners are eating and, later, a stop for motorbike repairs turns into an impromptu English lesson.

Despite its small size, Nusa Penida has its share of sights. Crystal Bay is an idyllic cove that fronts a coral reef and more experienced divers and snorkellers can swim with manta rays and reef sharks in Toyapakeh and at Malibu Point.

The village of Tanglad is home to a co-operative that specialises in traditional weaving. There is the temple complex of Ped, which is an important pilgrimage site for Balinese.



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Perhaps the best way to enjoy Nusa Penida, though, is to ease into the slow pace of life. "I struggle on the mainland these days," Appleton says, slightly apologetically.

"To be honest, it's all just a little too hectic for me now."

FAST FACTS

Getting there

From Bali's Denpasar Airport take a taxi to Sanur (about \$8), then catch one of the lightening-fast Maruti speedboats that leave from in front of the Ananda Beach Hotel (three daily, \$28 one-way). There is also an older public boat (90min, about \$8 one way). Alternatively, if you are coming from the north of Bali, car ferries depart Padang Bai twice daily (1hr, \$1.80 one-way). Check the ticket office at Padang Bai port for the timetable and arrive an hour before departure.

Staying there

The Friends of the National Park Foundation on Nusa Penida welcomes visitors for short stays but book ahead as space is limited. The basic but comfortable accommodation costs from \$12 for a dormitory bed to \$30 for a double room; there is also a family room; see fnpf.org.

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