

DEPARTURES

Reclaiming Bali

Long cast as a sort of modern-day Eden, Bali is feeling the ecological and infrastructural strain of its own success. But change is already underway, with a number of cutting-edge hospitality projects now doubling as living laboratories for sustainable tourism

It's a complicated moment to talk about Bali as a destination. The Indonesian island is going through a severe environmental crisis with the collapse of its waste-management system, clouds of thick, toxic smoke, and cliffs carved up by excavators.

At the same time, people keep coming – and coming. Long romanticised by much of the world as the ultimate tropical paradise, it has gradually fallen into the trap of its own fame: since up to 80 per cent of the province's GDP relies on tourism, the solution to Bali's current strains can't simply be to slash visitor numbers.

But crisis often breeds innovation, and contemporary Bali is no exception: both local communities and industry players are now mobilising to rethink their definition of hospitality – not by rejecting tourism, but by transforming it sustainably. Herewith, a look at three forward-thinking hotels charting a different, kinder course for the island's future.

Nirjhara



Northwest of Denpasar and Canggu, where the roads narrow and the terraced rice fields have not yet fallen under the gaze of a million smartphones, another Bali exists. It's here, in Tabanan, that Nirjhara has evolved with a simple but compelling proposition: escape and learn to breathe again. Suites and villas are arranged around a stream (*nirjhara* means "waterfall" in Sanskrit) and dissolve into the landscape so that nature is never a backdrop, but a conversation partner. They blend recycled wood, volcanic stone and natural fibres with strong traditional elements – such as sirap shingle roofing – that coexist alongside an overall contemporary aesthetic. Day to day, the hotel works actively with local communities in the region, which have long remained on the margins of tourism development. Staying here means putting money into places devoid of the usual tourist hordes: villages where the economy remains rural and whose residents still ply artisanal crafts and have not yet shifted toward mass production. Just as a minority of destinations worldwide absorb the vast majority of tourists, Nirjhara is a reminder that Bali is not saturated but rather unevenly distributed. It's also proof that the so-called Island of the Gods still has its edges and its silences, provided you know where to look.

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