

When it Comes to Luxury, Bali is the World's Best, The Age Australia, April 2010

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Bali's ultimate luxury hotels

AYANA Resort and Spa has been given a multi-million dollar makeover and now employs 1000 staff with butlers certified by the Guild of Professional Butlers.

You don't need to travel halfway across the world to experience some of the world's best hotels, writes Diana Plater.

Bali has the best hotels in the world.

Dubai and Abu Dhabi may disagree as may New York or Hong Kong.

But for sheer aesthetics, I don't think you can beat Bali.

And with more and more hotels now including private villas complete with pools - and your own butler - the Indonesian island's luxury reputation is heading sky-high.

The latest is AYANA Resort and Spa, which used to be the Ritz-Carlton Bali, Resort and Spa in Jimbaran.

It's been given a multi-million dollar makeover, now employs 1000 staff with butlers certified by the Guild of Professional Butlers and has become particularly well known for its new Rock Bar - a must-visit for anybody in the know.

Sipping cocktails as the sun melts into the Indian Ocean right in front of you and small jukung boats head out on fishing trips is pretty close to bliss (even if it is a bit hot!) Just keep an eye on your bag - there's naughty monkeys ready to jump.

To get to the bar perched on, yes indeed, a rock you ride down in an inclinator which also takes you to the Kisik Bar and Grill and the saltwater Ocean Beach pool, one of five pools at the resort.

AYANA is spread out over a 77 hectare site on the Jimbaren headland across from the airport. You can watch the planes landing and taking off, but not hear them.

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In our private pool next to our villa we took a midnight dip as fireworks lit up the sky - part of the entertainment for a wedding, one of many held at various venues, including two glass chapels overlooking the sea.

Some book out the incredible Presidential Suite or even hold their wedding there.

I met a bride, groom and bridesmaid the next day in the Aquatonic Seawater Therapy pool. As we bobbed from one water massaging jet to the next they told me they were from Jakarta and insisted Bali was the only place to visit in Indonesia. (I don't agree but still.)

The marine theme is continued in the Thermes Marins Bali Spa, which uses Thalasso treatments, derived from seawater. There's also Spa on the Rocks treatment villas near Kubu Beach, the resort's only beach, usually accessed by golf buggy driven by your butler or shuttle bus.

There are also shuttle services into town but it would really help to have your own transport unless you have no desire to leave the place.

The Jakarta businessman who owns the hotel re-branded and changed management companies a year ago after he successfully sued the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company in the US because it had opened a second resort in Bali under the name Bulgari, breaching an exclusivity clause in its management contract.

AYANA has been heavily marketing itself in Australia although we are fairly low on the list of customers - it's most popular with Japanese, other Indonesians, Koreans, Chinese and Europeans.

Villa guests have the option of several different restaurants for breakfast as well as other meals, including Dava, which now has an a la carte menu. At night it has the Martini Club for that pre-dinner cocktail.

Or for the really romantic, you can organise a private dinner on the jetty near the Rock Bar entertained by a Gamelan ensemble.

As General Manager Charles de Foucault says: "In your 20s you go to Kuta, in your 30s you go to Seminyak...then in their 40s...they want something a little more sophisticated...they just want to appreciate the nature and not just the Bintang.

"When you take over after Ritz Carlton it's a pretty big task...but AYANA has been able to make a name for itself within the first year.

"The Rock Bar's a must do in Bali now. If you don't have a drink there at sunset you're nobody."

For those who are still too young for AYANA's form of sophistication there's always the options of renting a villa in Seminyak, a bit closer to the action.

Space at Bali is two years old and is designed in a Moroccan style, with high roofs, a kitchen, an upstairs relaxation or "chill" and massage space, a partially outdoor bathroom and large lap pool. Each villa has two bedrooms but one can be closed off. They also can connect with the neighbouring villa, via the Balinese doors at the end of the pool, so if you have a bigger group you can all get together easily.

The quiet and private villas are close to the shopping area of Jalan Oberoi and not too far from the beach although it's a bit of a difficult walk given Bali's lack of proper footpaths.

Space has an arrangement with a local spa so you can have in-house massages. (The reflexology in particular was hard to beat.)

Breakfasts are brought to the villas and they can also arrange dinners there, and provide you with your own butler.

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At around \$US300 a night, Space represents great value, especially for families.

Also at the high end of the spectrum is the InterContinental Bali Resort, with probably the best location in Bali.

It's right on Jimbaren Bay, which has a beautiful gentle surf and none of the hawkers you face as soon as you set foot on Kuta or Legian's beaches.

The hotel has a Club InterContinental where guests are treated to an "elevated" standard of hospitality. It includes a private Club Lounge offering breakfast, snacks, English afternoon tea and evening cocktails. Its rooms and suites are sumptuous and Club guests have their own pool area as well.

It also has an Inspiration Space offering recreational activities and pastimes with Balinese themes, including workshops on painting, gamelan music and wayang puppet making.

The hotel's spa offers a wide range of therapies, including the two and a half hour Pure Indulgence at the Spa Villa Retreats, which begins with a cleansing foot bath ritual, then a massage, lavender body scrub, aloe and lavender body wrap, mini facial and ends with a flower bath.

Pure Luxury!