

MIAMI HERALD (COX NEWS SERVICE)

Posted on Sun, Jan. 25, 2009

Exotic Bali offers bargains at all levels

By CRAIG SIMONS

This island's tropical charms are more affordable than they have been for years.

This Hindu-majority island and tourist destination near the center of Indonesia's archipelago has always offered bargains. But a series of factors has made it even better, including the impact of the global recession and a 20 percent strengthening of the U.S. dollar against the Indonesian rupiah since 2006.

Many five-star hotels on the island offer rooms for under \$200. Spas price hour-long massages at \$10. Restaurants sell fresh seafood dinners for less than some fast-food meals in the United States. Local shops offer activities including scuba diving and horseback riding for a fraction of what they cost in the West. And airfare deals keep popping up that make getting here at least somewhat affordable -- around \$1,200 from New York.

TOP RESORTS

Many of the island's top luxury resorts have begun to offer steep discounts to attract recession-wary travelers. The Westin Bali, a sprawling, family friendly hotel with a good beach and swimming pool, is offering guests staying three nights a fourth night free. The Oberoi, the Indian luxury resort chain known for top-drawer service, has cut its rates until the end of March and may reduce them further.

The Como Shambhala Estate, featuring private villas with attached swimming pools and a wellness program, is considering promoting its rooms with 25-percent discounts for couples or friends, said general manager John Halpin.

"Like every life, hotels have cycles and there are good years and bad years," he said. "We're always willing to negotiate based on supply and demand."

Other resorts priced below \$150 a night provide rooms, grounds and service that would cost much more in the United States or Europe, said John Daniels, owner of Bali Discovery Tours, a company he founded in Bali after moving to the island in 1977.

Bali's combination of tropical appeal and bargain prices has helped it grow from a surfers' destination to a holiday retreat popular with backpackers, families and the ultra-rich. The number of foreign visitors to the Delaware-size island rose to 1.7 million in 2007 from 1.3 million in 1997.

The number of Americans visiting Bali plunged after a terrorist attack in Denpasar, its capital, killed 202 people in 2002. But last May, the U.S. Department of State lifted a travel warning, citing "objective (security) improvements" and the number of American visitors rose to more than 62,000 for the year.

MAIN ATTRACTIONS

Bali's unique combination of attractions is certain to draw more travelers in coming years. Without much effort, visitors can hike on volcanoes, dive or snorkel over coral reefs, visit spas and boutique shops and eat at restaurants serving both traditional Indonesian fare and fine French cuisine.

My wife and I sampled that variety during a trip to the island over Christmas and New Year's Eve.

We started on Bali's south coast, which is best known for its beaches and temples. Our favorite site was Pura Luhur Uluwatu, a Hindu shrine with ornate eaves and entranceways perched on a cliff above the Indian Ocean. Locals and tourists gather at the site each evening to watch the sun set, and we arrived in time to see the ocean fade from blue to red and then, with nightfall, black.

We also took advantage of the stop to learn about Balinese Hinduism. The religion, which became firmly rooted in Bali in the 16th century, seeks to balance forces of good and evil.

Because practitioners consider cliffs and mountains holy, temples generally offer an excellent combination of cultural heritage and good walking, and we spent an hour strolling along a beautiful coastline. After lazing on a beach and visiting the temple, we traveled to Lombok, an Indonesian island roughly 25 miles east of Bali that is gaining a reputation as Bali's more natural cousin.

Shortly after we pulled away from a dock for a two-hour ferry ride to Lombok, our ship's captain slowed and pointed to a pod of dolphins swimming in graceful swoops beside our boat. After we arrived at a quiet fishing port, we checked into an Oberoi hotel and wandered through gardens full of flowering trees. In the distance, a perfectly shaped volcano poked through heavy clouds.

The hotel offered a scuba diving package and we spent a morning swimming beside an underwater wall covered with coral and rich with marine life. Among thousands of species, we saw green sea turtles and white tip sharks.

Back in Bali, we explored the island's east coast, where many locals farm and fish. We stayed at a hotel called Alila, where clean, comfortable rooms start at \$125 daily, and took advantage of bargain prices on massages and tours. My wife joined a cooking class that included a market visit and we both enjoyed a walk organized by the hotel to a nearby village.

In Ubud, Bali's center of arts and spiritualism, we dined at the award-winning Mozaic restaurant, opened in 2001 by French-American chef Chris Salans. We ordered tasting menus and were served an incredible array of dishes, from bluefin tuna grilled with "citrus-infused bell pepper sauce" to foie gras served with pureed mango. Complemented with wine and excellent desserts, the bill came to less than \$100 each, and my wife, who writes about food and edits the Zagat guide to Beijing, proclaimed the feast a triumphal bargain. "In New York that meal would have cost at least two times as much," she said, wiping a passion fruit seed from the corner of her mouth.

Her statement was a tribute to Bali itself.