



'Its peculiar and fantastic nature, its complex variety of peoples and its fabulous richness...'

MIGUEL COVARRUBIAS  
ISLAND OF BALI, 1937



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# Bali idle

Colonial chic in groovy Seminyak

SUSAN KUROSAWA

IT is as if Singapore's Raffles Hotel has been shrunk and shifted — lock, stock and parlour palms — to a laneway in the fashionable Seminyak precinct. The colonial-style Villa Batavia is an oddity in Bali's world of holiday rentals. The accommodation on this Indonesian isle is almost squarely divided into thatched and traditional or ultra-modern and uber-glam. Batavia is none of these things.

The Swiss-based owners wanted a contemporary interpretation of colonial classic and that is exactly what Indonesian architect Putu Edy Semara delivered in 2008, complete with black and white granite-tiled colonnades and breezeways, pillared verandas, shuttered windows, teak four-posters and all the trademark tropical flourishes. The owners have added artwork that includes framed vintage postcards, maps, etchings and retro posters.

There are colourful Tiffany lamps, rattan furnishings, glass lanterns, cushioned cane furniture and slatted blinds. There's even a small massage salon and a tiled Moroccan-style steamroom.

Just off Jalan Laksmana and at the head of a secure laneway where other Prestige Bali Villas properties are discreetly tucked away, Batavia sleeps eight in two smaller ensuite doubles (Lombok and Sumba) and two master suites (Java and Flores) off ord of the (colonial) manor proportions. It is a splendid grown-up party pad but also one where the urge to wear planter's white linen and pith helmets seems rather irresistible.

Batavia was the Dutch colonial name for Jakarta and a thoughtfully provided copy of a book on the history of the then capital of the Dutch East Indies includes photographs of buildings that surely must have inspired this villa's design. The character and charm of the 19th-century Hotel des Indes, for example, could have formed part of the vision. In 1869, British anthropologist Alfred Russel Wallace described its accom-

modation thus: "The Hotel des Indes was very comfortable, each visitor having a sitting room and bedroom opening on a veranda, where he can take his morning coffee and afternoon tea.

"In the centre of the quadrangle is a building containing a number of marble baths always ready for use; and there is an excellent table d'hote breakfast at 10, and dinner at six, for all which there is a moderate charge per day."

Villa Batavia has more dignified bathing arrangements (the two master bedrooms come with copper tubs; all the toiletries are bespoke, in sweet combinations such as starfruit, passionfruit and pear), but there's still the air of a small hotel where old Asia hands of the ilk of Somerset Maugham or Noel Coward could drop by at any old tick for a pink gin.

With manager Juniarta (Jun) in charge of a dedicated team, Villa Batavia feels like a family home where retainers are on call. Whether or not one approves of the idea of servants (I always feel uncomfortable summoning, say, tea or towels), this team is particularly proud of their work and their place within Bali's tourism framework, where staffed villas are becoming as popular as hotel stays. Somehow, Jun, Billy, Made and driver Fanny are there when required and absent when not, with a radar-like efficiency.

Our little party of three barely fills a corner of Batavia. Even in the saltwater garden pool, which meanders past palms, orchids and waterfalls like a tiny river, we find our private spots to bob about as blue dragonflies buzz and falling pink frangipani petals gently plop. Lounging spots abound: low planter's chairs (naturally), garden loungers and big seats in the upstairs lounge, with its open windows on three sides and district views across tiled rooftops.

Batavia is arranged over three buildings linked by pergolas, and such companionable separation is the key to successful house-party



The artistically designed Villa Batavia offers an attractive alternative to traditional hotel accommodation in Bali

living. Every morning I take my coffee in the upstairs lounge and am joined, at a companionable distance, by a squirrel that runs along the laneway's power lines, swinging madly, like a tiny acrobat. Women pass by with offerings to the gods on their head, bound for Hindu temples and moving with the graceful ease of models.

One night we eat in, expecting a homely meal, but what we get is a restaurant-quality a la carte menu by candlelight, with monogrammed napkins and crested silver, served under ceiling fans in the long and airy upstairs dining room. There are Vietnamese rice-paper rolls, black-pepper lobster, Thai beef salad and banana fritters (dozens of other options can be pre-ordered, even Australian beef tenderloin or schnitzel).

With such a well-situated base,

you are within easy distance of Petitenget Beach and its Pura Petitenget, the fourth largest temple in Bali, plus cafes, galleries and shops, and such standout restaurants as Sarong (see box).

Or you could just stay put, as we do, and treat Villa Batavia as the most civilised of rest homes.

## Checklist

Villa Batavia is a member of the Prestige Bali Villas collection; from \$US945 (\$865) a day (sleeps eight). Rates include airport transfers and breakfasts. Well-priced drinks available; lunches and evening meals on request (there are two chefs in attendance). There's a computer in the upstairs lounge for guest use and free wi-fi throughout. More: [prestigebalivillas.com](http://prestigebalivillas.com).



The Colony Hotel at Seminyak has great opening specials



Teak four-posters add to a tasteful colonial ambience

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Manager Jun on bar duty

## In the neighbourhood

**Ku De Ta:** Still Seminyak's buzziest beach club, bar and restaurant, with killer martinis, mojitos and splendid food from Australian chef Phillip Davenport.

**Sarong:** Go to Ku De Ta for the scene but to Sarong for the superlative nosh; in a setting of bedroom-bling chandeliers, swagged curtains and mother-of-pearl placemats, chef Will Meyrick serves up specialty hawker food turned fine dining.

**La Lucciola:** Seminyak's best breakfasts, in a two-storey pavilion by the sea, or front up to the Sunset Bar for a smashing lychee-tini.

**The Colony Hotel:** A new project by Prestige Bali Villas, this

20-room boutique hotel (pictured) with courtyard pool has just opened over the fence from Villa Batavia. Great opening specials, no children under 16, Miami-inspired white decor.

**Potato Head:** The newest beach club in the precinct, Potato Head is a vast party space, its snail-like curved exterior covered with row upon row of old Javanese window shutters. Try a Campari and blood-orange juice to the sound of the sea.

**Woo Bar, W Retreat & Spa:** The just-opened W has a cool beachfront bar with daybeds, cocktail tables shaped like coral formations, rooftop hang-out, cool club lighting and beanbags.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

# A man walks into a bath . . .

ALISTAIR JONES

I AM drinking with a buddy in a Japanese bar. We're vaguely watching a baseball game on television but mostly getting silly on sake. By the time we make it back to our budget ryokan, I'm feeling floaty and think a bath before bedtime could be just the shot.

The corridors are dimmed and, apart from a few whispering voices behind closed doors, all is quiet and settled. I should have the

## THE INCIDENTAL TOURIST

men's communal bathroom to myself. I usually stay in hotels with my own ensuite, so this will be the first time I've attempted Japanese-style ablutions, but I think I know the drill.

Clothes are left outside the bathroom door and I enter with

just a small towel. The room is a medley of sickly pink tiling with a steaming cedar box for a bath. The deal is that you wash yourself thoroughly, soaping up and rinsing off while perched on a low plastic stool, before soaking in a bath. It's about as comfortable as squatting on an upturned beach bucket but more slippery.

I just make it into the bath without mishap before a strapping young Spaniard walks in and starts lathering up. If he were Japanese, he would have waited outside until

I'd finished. But no, soon we're shoulder to shoulder in a tub just right for one. Below the water line we're almost cheek to cheek.

Hadaka no tsukiai means naked socialising, a candid conviviality that's a feature of public bath houses, or sento.

The familiarity evaporates as soon as you leave the building but at least in a sento the baths are pool-sized, with space enough to keep a discreet distance as you chat. I don't think hadaka no tsukiai applies to two Westerners

wedged into the same domestic container.

But what the heck. I'm a little bit drunk and the scaldingly hot water is relaxing. As a bloke, he assures me up-front that he has a girlfriend. She's Swiss, they're travelling together, and he recently relocated to the chilly Alps to be with her. He misses Spain, but what can you do when you're in love?

I find out more about his relationship than I really need to know, but we also swap travel stories and it's not unlike killing

time with the person sitting next to you on an overnight bus or a long-haul flight, where proximity creates a temporary bond.

Next morning in the breakfast room the spell has broken. We barely acknowledge each other and he certainly won't be introducing me to his girlfriend.

But then, saying to your lover: "Darling, I'd like you to meet a strange man that I had a bath with last night", is probably not the smartest way to start a trouble-free day.

Japan's sento have been in decline since the 1970s when booming prosperity allowed homeowners to install private facilities, but there are still lots of tiny rented rooms without bathrooms, and of an early evening the occupants will set out for a wash. These days, it's mostly an older crowd.

Sento operators say growing independence among young people has given rise to self-consciousness about nudity.

It's a myth that the Japanese don't check out other people's

bodies. It's just that they are better at being subtle about it. The etiquette with strangers is to not make eye contact.

Another myth is that a chemical added to the bath water turns bright purple if you're silly enough to wee. Don't even consider busting it. There would be a riot. You would be electrocuted with shame. The almost barnyard frankness of public bathing is underlaid with a strict sense of consideration.

Don't turn up drunk, and enjoy your soak politely.