

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

TRAVEL + INDULGENCE

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Bali high

LUXE CAMPING IN THE HILLS OF UBUD PAGE 10



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SUSAN KUROSAWA

The early-morning sky is lightening in a blush of rosy pink, roosters are calling and gardeners in brimmed hats are already at work clearing fallen leaves from rocky paths. It's a soft and easy way to wake up in the Balinese hill station of Ubud. The golden sun soon emerges out of a quilt of clouds, softened to a gauzy glow through the mesh of my tent windows.

But let's not imagine I am camping in any real and rugged sense, because to refer to this canvas abode by that meagre term of tent is to diminish its deep comfort. I am tucked away, like a creature in hibernation, at Capella Ubud, an extraordinary jungle resort of 22 tented suites with saltwater plunge pools, plus a two-bedroom lodge. It is tethered on the slopes of Keliki Valley, near the artists' village of the same name, 30 minutes by road from Ubud proper.

The tents, with "Ferrari roofs", referring to the Italian premium-grade canopies, and springy teak floors, abound in luxuries such as an Illy coffee machine and tea-making kit, campaign-style trunk stuffed with daily replenished refreshments, best-quality white bed linen and bespoke toiletries from Bali's Republic of Soap that smell of tomato leaf, green mandarin and lemongrass.

The accommodation is highly individual, with textiles draped across ceilings and walls, and chairs and sofas that look almost Jacobean in height and heft. Expect indoor and outdoor showers, hand-hammered copper slipper bath, four-poster bed with extravagantly carved headboard, fast Wi-Fi access, and, in true safari camp fashion, four free pieces of laundry a day.

Views in all directions are of towering old trees and lush vegetation of palms and ferns so thick that I feel wrapped and sheltered in a cocoon of green. It's a planet removed from the hurly-burly of Bali's busy tourism precincts, and after a two-night stay I am still discovering little design details, follies and falderals, and cheeky monkey statues that make me smile anew.

Opened in July last year, and conceived from the outside in by marvellously inventive hotel designer and landscape architect Bill Bensley, Capella Ubud is almost wantonly decorative. Every interior surface reveals pattern and patina, weathered old pieces of Indonesian timber furniture and mossed stone statuary have been given new life and purpose, pots of white orchids and vases of sweet tuberose abound, lavatories in (immodestly semi-open) ensuites loom like mighty Victorian thunderboxes. US-born and long-time Asia hand Bensley has used key pieces from his private collections in the mix. To call it eclectic doesn't begin to do it justice.

The layout, based on minimum clearance and no cutting of trees on the forested site, gives Capella Ubud a higgledy-piggledy feel, and getting about is tough on the calf muscles if your tent is not close to the main facilities. There are no golf carts or guard rails and porters carry suitcases on their heads; it makes planning the day an exercise in organisation, lest multiple trips back to your "base" be required. I have been put in the Explorer's Tent, a fair hike down from reception and restaurants and reached by a swinging bridge, so ingenuity and daring is expected of me.

Explore I therefore do, enjoying the ups and downs of getting about and venturing for a swim each morning to the Cistern, a suitably grand name for a zigzag-tiled pool with wrap-around valley views, shaped as a rainwater reservoir with fountain spouts and constructed from marine-grade steel plates.

To get the lie of the land, as it were, imagine a raggedy square, plunging west to east between rainforest and rice terraces to the sacred Wos River and its waterside temple, and all the low-lying accommodation well camouflaged. The Armory is the gym (for tortuous training of the likes of GI Jungle sessions); the Camp Fire, on a patch of lawn, is like a boy scout bivouac for grown-ups; there are silent black-and-white movies shown after dinner on a makeshift screen, with marshmallow-toasting, hot chocolate drinks and warming liqueurs.



Tented suites are mostly named for long-ago encampment occupations such as Puppet Maker, Horn Collector, Architect and Cartographer, referencing the early 19th-century period of European exploration in Bali. I imagine at the high arch of darkest night, while fireflies gad about and monkeys shriek, that the settlement turns into a magic village and all these tradespeople come to life and get busy, with quite a merry commotion in the Toy Maker's Tent.

While the top restaurants of Ubud (hello, Hujan Locale) are within easy reach by scheduled shuttle bus or booked taxi, most guests are here for just a few nights and Australian-born culinary director Matthew McCool's cuisine is so exceptional that dining out seems redundant. To watch this chef in action, assisted by key members of his brigade, at Api Jiwa is to appreciate the choreography of cooking. Cool Hand Matt I call him, behind his back.

Open only for twice-nightly dinner sessions, Api Jiwa means soul of fire in Sanskrit but this is no trumped-up barbecue. The style is more a Japanese-influenced robatayaki grill station with a three-sided counter and guest seating, plus spillover tables for more intimate dining; the menu of an average of eight small courses is the chef's choice of the

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IN THE KNOW

Accommodation is divided into five Terrace Tents, with easiest access; four Rainforest Tents in a jungly setting; eight River Tents on a gradient (expect to climb); and five Keliki Valley Tents with best valley vistas and larger plunge pools. The two-bedroom tented lodge has a large undercover pool and entertainment area. Api Jiwa and Mads Lange are open to non-guests. Valid to December 20, stay three consecutive nights for the price of two, including airport transfers, daily breakfast, in-tent refreshment trunk, and morning coffee, afternoon tea, cocktails and canapes daily in the Officer's Tent.

■ capellahotels.com

day but allergies and dietary preferences are easily catered for.

The open-sided setting is moody and magical, almost merging into dense vegetation, with decor a mix of worn baskets and pots, ornamented door frames hung as wall installations, and laundry artefacts. The dishes are dainty, perfectly plated on beautiful Balinese-made ceramics, and although courses change with season and availability, the emphasis is on sustainably farmed produce. There could be the likes of pearl meat, zesty salads topped with discs of radish, kingfish and tiny cushion-like buns stuffed with barbecued meat.

The main split-level restaurant, Mads Lange, is named for Danish spice trader, entrepreneur and acknowledged "peace-maker" and mediator between colonisers and locals, Mads Johansen Lange (1807- 1856). It's in the style of a pitch-roofed rice barn, and breakfast, lunch or Sunday "jungle jazz" brunch on its jutting deck, with plunging views and gold-fringed Balinese umbrellas shading tables, are treats to be lingered over. The best start to the day up here is a jamu health tonic of turmeric, lemon, tamarind, brown sugar and wild honey.

A rijstaffel banquet at Mads Lange, presented as a succession of signature dishes



Clockwise from main:
Capella Ubud; private saltwater
plunge pool; upstairs at Mads
Lange restaurant;
spa treatment ingredients;
tents feature bespoke decor



MORE TO THE STORY

THE BEST OF ASIA'S TENTED ACCOMMODATION

Amanwana, Moyo Island, Indonesia Just over an hour by seaplane from Bali, this classic encampment (pictured) opened in 1993, features 20 massive abodes with all the expected Aman touches; choose a jungle or beachfront canvas suite and expect macaque monkeys and rusa deer to call by. Great diving plus private sailing; aman.com.
Four Seasons Tented Camp Golden Triangle, Thailand This Bill Bensley original, with claw-foot tubs, open-air showers and five-star comfort in 15 tents, is hunkered amid a setting of jungle, river and tall grasses;



interact with rescued elephants and their mahouts in an environment that never feels less than authentic; fourseasons.com.
Oberoi Vanyavilas, India In the nation's north, near the entry to Ranthambore National Park, where tiger sightings are

increasingly rare, the 25 "kingly" khaki-coloured tents are indeed fit for royalty, with rajah-worthy four-poster beds and all creature comforts considered across an oasis-like 8ha estate dotted with lily ponds; oberoihotels.com.

Shinta Mani Wild, Cambodia Near Siem Reap, this new Bensley offering, a member of his branded collection, sits amid the confluence of three national parks; optional arrival by zipline to a compound of 15 explorer tents, with wildlife sightings all but guaranteed; shintamani.com.

Also try Tiger Tops Elephant Camp, Nepal; Sher Bagh, India; Sandat Glamping, Bali; Rosewood Luang Prabang, Laos; Nine Hornbills Tented Camp, Phang Nga Bay, Thailand.

from the spice trading era, served on a round sharing tray like an Indian thali, comes with a hillock of crackers and the implicit narrative of influences from Dutch settlers. Included in the tariff are afternoon tea and pre-dinner drinks and canapes in the 24-hour Officer's Tent near the reception pavilion.

The fit-out here is Bensley at his most brilliant. Think: wooden deer's heads necklaced with beads and floral garlands, massive oriental urns, furniture that ranges from mid-century utilitarian to Indo-Victoriana, Bohemian

mirrors and canvas walls lined in ikat fabrics woven with garudas and flowers. It is all a fabulous folly, this pretence of a garrison outpost in the jungle, with no hint of hardship, and unexpected detours and discoveries at every turn. It could be preposterous but is done with such a tacit wink and a nod, and great respect for the environment, that you'd be an unimaginative sod not to be won over.

But there are a few management negatives. While each tent is assigned a so-called culturalist (a bush butler, perhaps), mine disappears

on his days off and I am left adrift with conflicting information. There's no senior management on site the weekend I visit and the few problems I encounter are not addressed; other guests seem similarly perplexed by a succession of service deficiencies. It must be noted, too, that guests with mobility issues would have real problems with the site; tents closest to the entrance and main facilities are Voyager's and Toy Maker's but I doubt whether wheelchair access would be possible.

Small irritations aside, I would return in a

heartbeat and, despite its faraway feel, at the resort's southeast rim, I'd book the Bird Watcher's Tent and sign up for the 24-hour Confined to Quarters deal, with a holy water ritual blessing, private yoga session, massage, floral bath and private chef popping by with my meals in tiffin carriers. No TV or playlist. Just me, binoculars, books and let's add a Cool Hand Matt mocktail of ginger ale, cucumber syrup and mint. Green peace.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Capella Ubud

Best feet forward in Chennai

KENDALL HILL

I am standing awkwardly on an outdoor stage, heels together and feet splayed, as if trying to perfect the first position in ballet. In fact, it's a lesson in Bharatanatyam, a form of classical dance from India's Tamil Nadu state. My teacher is a virtuoso of the form, Shirisha Shashank, and she's glowing after performing for us at Chennai's Taj Connemara hotel in the steaming heat of a March evening.

"This dance dates from 2000 years ago," she says as she straightens our wonky feet and neatens our knees. "It was practised in temples in South India. We have so many temples and each one had many dancers who performed this as an offering to the gods."

Bharatanatyam has a controversial history: its always-female dancers, the devadasis, were later introduced to royal courts to perform for kings, but the arrival of the Raj saw their roles cheapened and, later, banned. Since independence there's been a resurgence of interest in what is possibly India's oldest dance form and its precise pantomime of dramatic gestures and expressions.

"In this dance, actions speak louder than words. Gesture, facial expressions and bodies are used to tell the story," Shashank explains, while demonstrating some of the stylised movements used to convey emotion and



Shirisha
Shashank
dancing
at Taj
Connemara
in Chennai

meaning. The symbolism is universal: whether she is pointing at stars, eating a morsel of food, or expressing disgust — her face contorting as her hands thrust the offensive thing away — the actions are recognisable.

Bharatanatyam uses 32 single and 28 double hand movements; she teaches us how to make the form of a rose, and a lotus. The nine rasas, facial expressions of emotion, are far more difficult to master but she switches between these with elegance and ease in her shimmering sari and oiled and flowered hair.

Shashank began learning this art form from age five and gave her first performance at eight. She is one of Chennai's top Bharatanatyam dancers and performs internationally, so it's a privilege to have her here at the Connemara, patiently explaining her craft.

The 147-room historic hotel, built in 1854 and remodelled over the years with art deco elements (1937) and South Indian styling by celebrated Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa (1971), has just emerged from a year-long renovation ready for another century of service.

Once a bastion of the British Raj, today's Connemara embraces its South Indian heritage with the Bharatanatyam shows, day trips to the remarkable shore temples of Mahabalipuram, and evocative walking tours by expert Storytrails guides exploring everything from music to food.

But for an insight into regional cuisine there's no need to venture further than the Connemara's Raintree restaurant. Modelled on the elaborate wooden houses of the Chet-

tiar merchant caste, and set in a garden of frangipani and mango trees, the restaurant showcases the spices that enriched the Chettiar's bank accounts and bellies.

Executive chef Kishore Kumar toured the Chettinad region, southwest of Chennai, learning recipes "from the grandmothers in their houses" before opening Raintree in October.

His banquets draw on the larder of southern spices including endemic ones such as Marathi moggu, the unopened flower bud of the red silk-cotton tree or kapok, which are fried in oil to intensify their mustard and black-pepper characters. It features alongside star anise, long peppers and cumin in dishes such as mutton sukka — slow-cooked goat served with lemon rice — while kingfish curries combine tamarind and fenugreek.

Feasting on Chettinadi dishes in this balmy garden setting after Shashank's performance feels as authentic an experience as it's possible to find in South India, until Kumar admits he's tweaked the recipes for our palates. "We've reduced the spice levels by about 40 per cent," he confesses. He didn't want to cause us any discomfort "in the middle of the night".

■ adventureworld.com.au
■ storytrails.in
■ tajhotels.com

Kendall Hill was a guest of Adventure World Travel and Taj Hotels.