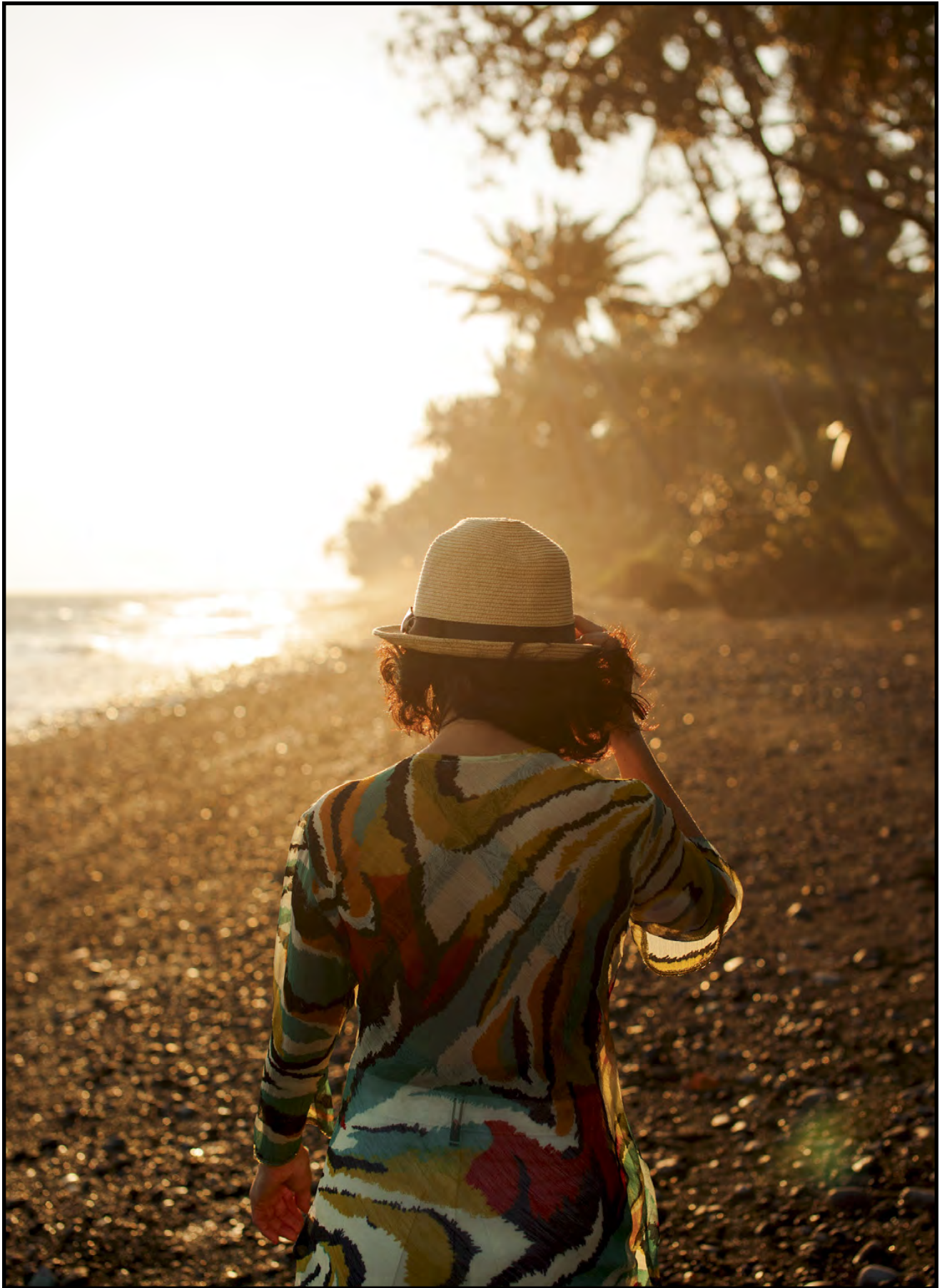




Transcendence

Rising above prosaic daily life,
and Bali's hectic south, *HOLLY*
MCDONALD hits the restart
button at some of the island's
more remote natural retreats.

Seventy gardeners
maintain the
greenery at COMO
Shambhala Estate.
Opposite: The black
sand beach of Spa
Village Tembok.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY LAURYN ISHAK





e've wound our way up into the orange-grove laden mountains of Kintamani, passing views of Lake Batur, scenes of traditional rural life and glimpses of volcanic peaks. Shrines are wrapped in black-and-white checked fabrics, shaded by golden umbrellas. Hibiscus flowers wend over stone carvings. Mossy walls shield family compounds with cocks strutting outside. We pass small plantations of cacao, papaya and bananas until the mist of mountains gives way to an ocean panorama.

All of this beauty is why I get so defensive when people insist the crowds of the south mean Bali's best days are over. The interior and the north are the island's retort to those maligners.

I'm juicing, stretching and bird watching my way through three natural-living retreats, which despite occupying varied landscapes—black-sand beach, oceanic protected park, lush hilly interior—collectively encapsulate the gentle spirit of Bali, away from the busy, mercantile south.

A three-hour trip to the northeastern tip from the hectic Kuta area has allowed me to relax into the full gamut of the island's geography before arriving at Spa Village Resort, where I'm enrolled in a short version of its "School of Life" program. Like many, I live a relentless march of deadlines and parenting, with little time for reflection and planning for meaningful things—stuck in a routine that's reactive rather than proactive. My time here is a whirl of healthful meals, spa, classes and quiet time to allow me to recalibrate my life, to hit the restart button.

That begins with a black-sand cleansing foot ritual, to rid me of any negativity arising from the earth. Then, for my first treatment, my legs are smothered in red clay and I'm left alone for 10 minutes. All I can do is listen to music, eat my frozen watermelon and sip my ylang-ylang flower water. It's an induction into stillness.



Later, two therapists are filling the bath in my room, so I sit outside on my veranda overlooking a lotus pond to read. But there's not enough light, so I'm left yet again, listening to insects, and voices drifting over the lawn and through the frangipani trees. Sheer torture. But I've mind-melded into my surrounds by the time I step into the bath, a detoxifying blend of volcanic clay, the leaves of various local plants and the essential oils of neem, piper beetle, turmeric, tea tree, citronella and patchouli. I am becalmed, centered and en route to a more healthful me.

Spurred on by the thought of seeing a sunrise over black sands scattered with local *jukung* (outrigger fishing boats), I pull myself out of bed for an early morning swim. As much as I've been trying to abandon my phone, I've got to break my moratorium to Instagram this dusty rose sunrise. From the beachside, infinity-edged pool, the horizon seems liquid as the day slowly asserts itself.

I attend a class to learn the basics of *pencak silat*, an ancient Balinese martial art; I practice swing yoga, swaying in a hammock-like contraption by the sea. Both classes are such hard-core sessions, so focused on learning precise moves and postures, so far removed from even the strict routine of my usual Bikram yoga—that I feel like I've had a good physical as well as mental workout. Using a mortar and pestle, I pound fresh galangal, cloves and soaked rice to make a headily aromatic body scrub. It's about body and earth: back to the basics of life.

Throughout my stay, I'm sipping herbal teas from a flask I've been instructed to carry with me at all times, or staff members are chasing me down to hand me freshly shucked yellow coconuts, the kind used in Bali's many ceremonies, reputed to have greater health-giving properties than your standard young green coconut. It's hydration on hyperdrive.

From left: Welcome to Spa Village; descend to the Ayung River from COMO Shambhala.

Opposite clockwise from top left: Spa Village's infinity pool, and traditional *lulur* body scrub; COMO Shambhala hosts Balinese dancers, and, Sandy, its golden retriever.

*The silence
of the water
is a meditation
in its own right,
allowing contemplation
without distractions*





Treehouse living at
COMO Shambhala.
Opposite: Plying the
waters near Java from
The Menjangan.

On my final morning, the hotel arranges a visit to a local white-bearded Balinese healer at his home. The massage session, on a simple mattress behind a privacy sheet hanging from the roof, is intuitive and strong; the healer, Ketut, eventually gives me a diagnosis. “Your chakras are all alive.” It’s a welcome surprise, since I usually feel like I’m playing catch-up. The subtext seems to be: “Get ahead of life. What are you waiting for?”

THE GUIDE IS PATIENT IN DIRECTING OUR binoculars to the right spot. It takes a moment but finally we see them: two endangered Bali starlings perched at the top of a tree. We can see their drooping, distinctive white crests, the blue patches around their eyes and their black-tipped wings.

They are stunning. While estimates vary, only around 100 remain in the wild and these were likely released from captivity as part of the resort’s breeding program. I no longer resent getting up at 5:30 a.m. to go bird watching.

West Bali National Park in the island’s far northwest makes for a different kind of back-to-nature getaway. I’m staying at The Menjangan, seaside in the park, where aside from bird watching, horseback riding, diving, snorkeling, hiking and just beachside chilling are on offer.

Getting here has taken me through an under-touristed part of Bali. Thanks to its proximity to Java, around the western port of Gilimanuk and across Bali’s flat northern coast, there’s more of a Muslim influence here than elsewhere on the island: curved domes of mosques grace the main road every now and again; I pass cycling school boys wearing embroidered skullcaps, and catch the wafting strains of a haunting call to prayer.

From the resort, my snorkeling trip to nearby Menjangan Island, a highlight of the national park, begins with a 30-minute boat drive during which we spot a pod of dolphins jumping in the distance. Once in the water, our guide points out a massive pink stonefish crouched in the sands meters below. The soft corals of brilliant blues, greens and pinks plus the array of fish are astounding. At one point, I spy three distinct schools of fish, each on top of the other: swirling silver trevally, yellow and white angelfish, and another electric-blue type of fish. It’s like a swimming rainbow.

At our next stop, we follow a massive drop-off along its edge with another dense coral garden and again loads of life. The sun comes out from behind a cloud and crepuscular rays light up the scene, fish glistening. There are trumpet fish, sea anemones, large grouper and parrotfish mauling the harder coral. It’s a thrilling bombardment of

the natural kind; the silence of the water is a meditation in its own right, allowing for contemplation without any distractions.

Back on board, we devour our lunch of *pepes ikan*, or fish steamed in banana leaves, before zipping back for a reflexology session in the mangrove-set spa, where I drift off listening to lapping waters and chirping birds.

Sunsets are lazy affairs here; I take a lounger for happy hour, sipping on a rosella margarita and watching frolicking deer. “Menjangan” means deer in Indonesian and the park is home to Javan rusa and Indian *muntjac* (barking) species. A single *jukung* bobbing offshore makes for a perfect photo, the low tide shows the mangrove roots in their gnarled glory, and Java’s volcanoes glow pink-purple.

I’m staying at a lodge off the beach, a few minutes away by the resort’s safari minibus. After dark, I clamber up to sit on the roof, spotlights ablaze to highlight any wildlife. During the day I see wild chickens, monkeys and more deer, but this evening I spot only frogs and insects. They may not be the most glamorous critters, but they bring the night to life with their humming stridulations and baritone harmonies.

MY BUTLER SETTLES ME INTO MY ROOM.

Though, that’s almost an inappropriate description of this vast, wooden, serene space overlooking a palette of greens and a rushing creek with a roar as soothing as surf. It seems cruel to advise leaving this sanctuary as soon as I’ve dropped my bags, but the butler suggests that I head straight to yoga, and I have to admire her efficiency in getting me to actively unwind; COMO Shambhala Estate is a wellness retreat, after all. Programs here cater to an individual’s needs; I decide to focus on exercising and eating only raw foods.

So off I hustle to the yoga pavilion, which overlooks an undulating spread of landscaped gardens. A storm plays out on the horizon and the natural drama is so compelling that it’s hard to concentrate on our instructor, Mark. But our class falls into a rhythm of postures, deeply breathing the oxygen-heavy air, and I’m glad I’ve plunged right in.

And Mark says: “It’s not about seeking happiness, or avoiding unhappiness. We can seek, instead, transcendence. We may be happy or unhappy, but this will pass. We can touch it and let it go if we can transcend it.”

This is wisdom I’m ready to hear after spending an unusual amount of time pondering such matters in previous days, and there’s a joy in discovering a vague feeling you have being put into just the right words; most of the time, I have

Clockwise from top left: A Beach villa at The Menjangan; vegan pizza at COMO Shambhala; dreamy Spa Village; a Menjangan kayak in West Bali National Park.



to admit, bursts of philosophy during yoga class merely irritate me.

I've been anything but irritated on this drift through the best of Bali's natural offerings, let alone here at COMO. A fairyland-like lawn sprawls down to the Ayung River and mist-spray from a nearby waterfall creates a rainbow in the early morning sunshine. It feels mythical, a step away from the real world where the possibilities are endless. It's a vision so singularly beautiful that I instinctively secrete it away, tuck it into a mental vault to unwrap and peer at later when the mundane of everyday life gets to be too much.

We pass a spring that is the source of all water on the property—including swimming pools. It's this native hydration not to mention 70 gardeners, a full fifth of the staff, that maintain this natural green. From the breakfast restaurant I can see green paddy skimming the top of the ridge opposite; the scene is awesome, in the older sense of the word. On evenings, the estate's grounds become temple-like, flickering with candles lit in symmetrical lines, the grounds reverently hushed except for plump frogs thrumming in the lotus ponds.

It's perhaps my immersion in such Zen-like surrounds that leaves me not just open-minded at the prospect of a strictly raw diet, but also thoroughly enjoying it as well. A raw lasagna, for example, is a little green and red package bursting with flavor, layers of finely slice zucchini, semi-dried tomatoes, a creamy nut dressing, two kinds of pesto on the side and a watercress herb salad. A simple soup of almond, pine nuts and green herbs garnished with green grapes and flaked almonds has a wonderful depth. One evening I order a Caesar salad that comes with "nut cheese." It sounds dreadful but it's so good I'm soon Googling to see how I can make it myself at home—something I know I can

do with the beverages, at least. I attend a juice-making class, and weeks later I'm still making the chef's recommended 2 p.m. pick-me-up: a blend of orange, lime, turmeric, ginger, cayenne pepper and flaxseed oil.

It's a small thing, but a real life change, much like the after-effects of the deep tissue massage (with a facial, naturally) in which I ask for special attention to be given to releasing my hips. When I attend my next Bikram yoga class back home, I definitely feel more flexibility in my hip flexors; I've liberated new territory.

In fitting with the Balinese dualistic view of the world (the black-and-white checked fabric used so often in temples is meant to demonstrate precarious equilibrium), where opposites are equally important, my time at COMO has been a blur of sumptuous exertion and relaxation, indulgence and abstinence—that's balance, right?

On my final morning, I've been pummeled, blasted and shot. My muscles are jelly after 45 minutes of intense aqua therapy in a warmed outdoor pool. Now wrapped and draped in several white fluffy towels, I recline on a lounge bed, depleted but blissed out, a cocoon of calmness gazing at birds fluttering from palm tree to palm tree.

I'm afraid I'm very happy. And it's going to be hard work to transcend it. +

T+L Guide



STAY

Spa Village Tembok Bali

Jln. Singaraja-Amlapura No. 100, Desa Tembok, Buleleng; 62-362/32-033; spavillage.resort.com; "School of Life" program, double, from US\$340 per night.

The Menjangan West Bali National Park, Jln. Raya Gilimanuk, Singaraja Km

17, Buleleng; 62-362/94-700; themenjangan.com; double from US\$220 per night.

COMO Shambhala

Estate Banjar Begawan, Payangan; 62-361/978-888; comohotels.com; "Discover Daily" program, doubles from US\$800 per night.

Below: Horseback riding and snorkeling at The Menjangan. **Opposite:** Chilling beachside at The Menjangan.



HIDDEN BALI

Volcanoes, paddies or farms, beaches, rivers or cliffs: Bali offers plenty of tranquil retreats in breathtaking natural surrounds.

The short trip up Bali's southwest coast to beachside **Alila Soori** offers sweeping views of volcanoes and paddies; once you arrive, rejuvenation time in the hushed spa is essential. *Banjar Dukuh, Desa Kelating, Kerambitan, Tabanan; 62-361/894-6388; alilahotels.com; doubles from US\$650.*

It's one of Bali's older hotels, but the **Amankila**, backed by Mount Agung and set hillside on the east coast, draws loyal guests like bees to honey. While away time on the black-sand private beach, at the three-tiered pool or ensconced in classic luxury. *Manggis; 62-363/41-333; amanresorts.com; doubles from US\$950.*

Nine-suite, riverside **Fivelements** offers a stunning riverside location with a world-class raw food and vegan restaurant and an array of holistic treatments. *Puri Ahimsa Banjar Baturning, Mambal; 62-361/469-260; fivelements.org; doubles from US\$575.*

Set on the limestone cliffs of Bukit in the far south, **Karma Kandara Resort** offers spectacular views; book time at their sauna and private pool to savor one of Bali's most amazing outlooks solo. *Jln. Villa Kandara, Banjar Wijaya Kusuma, Ungasan; 62-361/848-2200; karmakandara.com; one-bedroom villas from US\$760.*

In the cooler hills of Bali's interior, stay in a bamboo hut on its own hill surrounded by spiky pineapples and rolling farmland at **The Organic Farm Bali**; roast marshmallows in a bonfire and the kids can sleep in their own tent. *Jln. Munduk Lumbang Angseri, Baturiti; 62-813/3894-3030; theorganicfarmbali.com; doubles from Rp4,840,000 for two nights.*

