



# BRAND-NA

GROUNDLED LUXURY  
AMID THRIVING  
LOCAL CULTURE?

**DIANA HUBBELL**

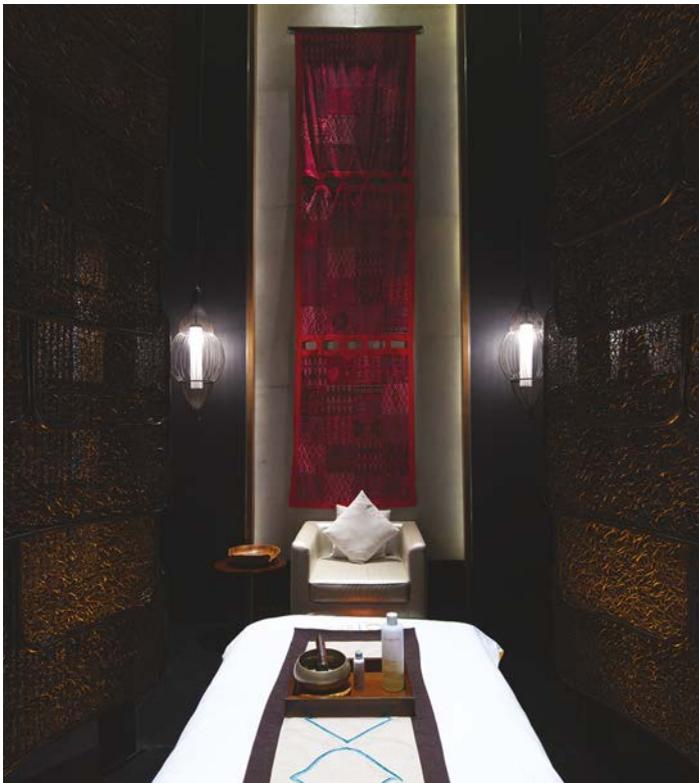
ASSERTS THAT YOU  
STILL CAN HAVE IT  
ALL ON THE EVER-  
MORE-UPSCALE  
BUKIT PENINSULA.

**PHOTOGRAPHED  
BY NIKOLA KOSTIC**





# MIE BALI



Waiting for a bite in Jimbaran.  
**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Sofitel's spa; plump prawns at Sofitel; a Ritz-Carlton balcony; standing tall at Nikki Beach; shockingly understated Bulgari; Bulgari serves rich treats.

**A**nd this is just a lower-caste wedding,” whispers Tasya, who with her friend Tommy is one of my two partners in gluttony for the day. We’ve been delayed in our quest for *babi guling* by a swarm of women in towering, gilded headdresses and embroidered sarongs that has invaded the street. This being Bali, the rickety motorbikes and cars part for the procession, rather than the other way around, and just like that a major road is closed until who-knows-when. “At an upper-caste one, the ornaments are even higher and even heavier.”

“There’s always something unexpected going on around here,” Tommy says. Maybe, but these guys have volunteered to take me down Nusa Dua’s narrow alleys for some real Balinese food—specifically a porcine extravaganza—and our destination, Warung Pak Dobeil, is just a little shack rumored to have long lines by 11 a.m. My stomach and nerves are grumbling at the delay, still the romantic in me is thrilled by this serendipitous cultural encounter.

On an island where luxury tourism just keeps growing, it’s a shock to the senses to see the real world, still raw around the edges, minutes from all those Instagram-candy infinity pools. Bali booms, but you already knew that. The Bukit Peninsula is turning into a high-stakes arms race as each five-star competes to outshine its neighbors. It’s a Who’s Who in hospitality: Aman, St. Regis, Club Med, Grand Nikko, and the mammoth, three-part Mulia. Newest is the sleek Sakala, as well as a stunning Ritz-Carlton draped down a sheer cliff face by way of a great, glass elevator to a winding series of rice paddy-inspired lagoons. Next door, the concrete skeleton of a 600-plus-room Kempinski looms. Sofitel has just added the island’s only cutting-edge medical spa and a Nikki Beach Club. Meanwhile, even over on Uluwatu, the Alila and the Bulgari Resort Bali are taking the surf locale upscale.

Bali is no untrammled oasis, but there’s something grand about its current incarnation where some thoughtfully designed hotels coexist alongside patches of a thriving local life, where the best lobsters come from the docks and not an airplane, where floral offerings litter the



In Jimbaran, fishing boats bring their haul to *pasar ikan*, or the seafood market.

**OPPOSITE:** Nikki Beach club, temple to hedonism, is brand new to Nusa Dua.

sidewalks each morning, and where some of the most revered restaurants are street-side *warungs*. Here you can eat truffle-oil-anointed sashimi and suckling pig from a makeshift firepit all in the same day.

Yes, we at last make it to Warung Pak Dobeil and the promised pork is more than worth the trouble. *Babi guling* pretty much defines nose-to-tail dining: a whole suckling pig is gutted, crammed with spice paste and herbs, then surgically sewn back together before slow-roasting for hours. Shards of skin, deep-fried intestines, pork *sate*, and collagen-rich bone broth accompany the tender meat. Served with an incendiary sambal to cut the fat, this pork is an undeniable affirmation of why I cannot be a vegetarian. It’s all I wanted and more.

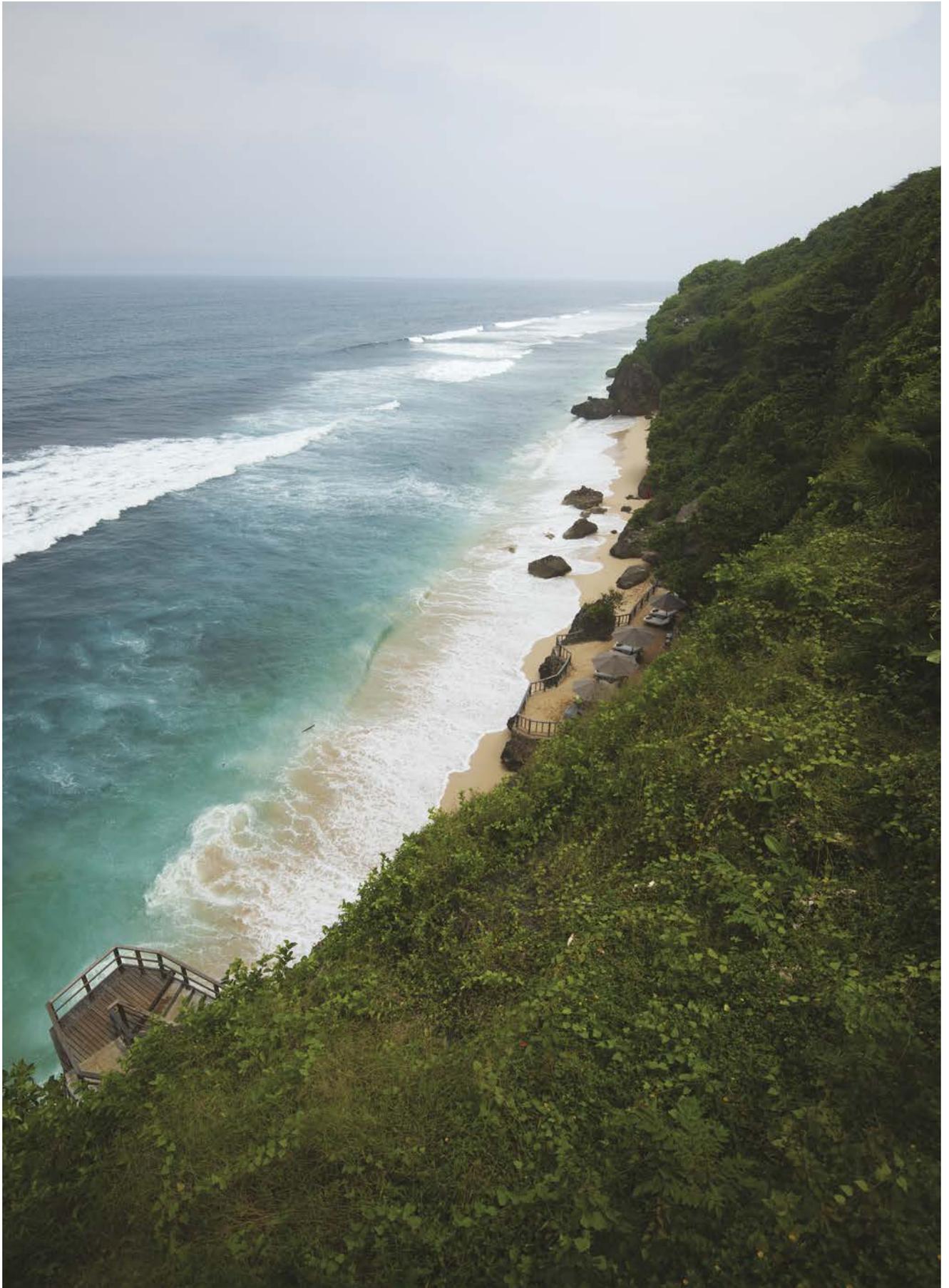
“You know, it’s a shame for you to come all this way and not try *nasi ayam*,” Tasya begins. *Nasi ayam* is the halal equivalent to my piggy feast, though it’s equally popular with non-Muslims.

“The place next door is owned by the same family as Dobeil and their version is excellent,” Tommy teases. “We could just try a bite...”

Minutes later, a plate of chicken materializes, topped with a hard-boiled egg, peanuts and a glob of chili paste. It vanishes with equal speed. Drenched in sweat and stretching the limits of human stomach capacity, I’m both intrigued and horrified when Tommy and Tasya mention that, although this *nasi ayam* is good, it isn’t really the best, and it would be a crime to come to Bali without trying the famous Ibu Oki’s rendition.

With no turning back now, we weave down the road past whole families piled circus-style on scooters to another unassuming *warung* with a formidable line. This rendition is saucier and less scorching, though every bit as addictive.





“See, this is the trouble with living here,” Tommy groans. “We can’t eat like this every day, but it’s so tempting.”

**B**ut I can eat like this every day—at least for my time here. Which is why one morning I rise at an ungodly hour to join I Made Suriana, the chef de cuisine at Ritz-Carlton Bali, as he scours *pasar sayur* for produce and *pasar ikan* for seafood. Along the way, he describes the distinct cuisines in this country of 300 ethnic groups and more than 700 languages and dialects.

“In Sumatran *rendang*, they use coconut at the beginning of cooking. If you go to Java, they put a lot of a *gula melaka*, palm sugar, in,” he says, snatching up half a dozen tiger prawns. “Go to Flores, you’ll see the Portuguese influence. I take a little bit from everywhere, but mostly I am Balinese and I cook Balinese.”

Greater and lesser galangal, turmeric root, kaffir lime, candlenuts, roasted shrimp paste and fistfuls of screaming-red chilies are sautéed, puréed, then sautéed again to produce the fiercely aromatic *bumbu* that forms the backbone of other dishes.

“Bruise the lemongrass or there’s no taste!” chef commands. “Now tie it in a knot to make it easier to fish out later.”

“Fold your banana leaves this way, not that way. That’s how you know whether the inside is sweet or savory.”

“Smell the shrimp paste—it could kill your cat. Then roast it over the grill. Smell the difference?”

We whip up electric-green pandan crepes with braised jackfruit, minced duck meat steamed in banana leaves, tuna *sate lilit* skewers on lemongrass, *nasi goreng*, and finally, a bunch of those magnificent salt-water prawns slathered in *bumbu*.



“Now you see why women get to the market before 5 a.m. to start preparing the food,” chef smirks as I bungle another *sate lilit*. He takes my mangled fish and wizards it into a pleated shape.

My lessons in local brewing continue at L’Atelier Parfums et Créations, where guests create fragrances from combinations of 44 essential oils ranging from spices such as nutmeg and cloves, to flowers like ylang-ylang and frangipani, to woods such as massoia, which smells intensely of coconut, and agarwood, a substance worth more per ounce than gold.

“Indonesia is such an important center of raw materials,” effuses Nora Gasparini in her breathy French accent. “About 80 percent of everything here is local.” A striking native of Martinique with a pixie cut framing her petite face and high cheekbones, she has been working with perfumes in Bali since she arrived six years ago. Enigmatic, heady and with a deep sense of place, the scent we concoct together quickly replaces the brand-name staple I’ve been wearing daily for years.

**S**ince I’m already mixing science and beauty, I check in to Sofitel Nusa Dua’s Vietura. While the hotel’s day spa is robed in dark tones and burnished bronze, Vietura medical spa is like a plush doctor’s office with high-tech treatments including cryogenically freezing your fat. My girly side is thrilled when my technician offers dermabrasion with diamond particles, along with a blast of super-chilled oxygen. Though some of the chemistry eludes me, the results speak for themselves: I emerge two hours later shining bright and minus a few stress lines.

No detox is complete without a re-tox, especially on this pleasure-centric playground. If you’re going to dive headfirst into Nusa Dua’s pursuit of hedonism, there’s no better place to do it than Nikki Beach, the newest member of the empire that stretches from Ibiza to Phuket.

“Understatement” is unheard of in this world of aerialists, models and bottles. On this particular Sunday, the brunch is in full swing. Enviably curvaceous women, in feathered headdresses and not much else, shimmy along the bar in stilettos to a saxophonist’s solo. And although the crowd never gets too rowdy, there’s plenty of dancing in and out of the pool before the sun begins to set.

“We definitely stand out in Nusa Dua,” admits the appropriately named general manager, Michael Sin, a 16-year veteran of the company who started as a busboy back at the brand’s flagship Miami property, then a regular haunt of A-listers from Madonna to Matt Damon, and has

Partner your detox at Vietura medical spa with healthy, locally sourced meals at Sofitel. **OPPOSITE:** On the Bulgari-accessed beach in Uluwatu, it’s still possible to experience rough and rugged Bali.



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just moved here from Thailand. “Plenty of people asked why we’re not in Seminyak, but I think we’re exactly where we need to be. When we opened in Samui, a lot of people doubted us, and now that club does upwards of 800 people at brunch during high season.”

I walk for the better part of an hour before I find the only other inhabitant on a jungled stretch of nowhere. My feet sink into the slope of coarse sand. To my left, huge translucent waves rear up and froth to the ground. To my right, limestone cliffs rise, riddled with crags and choked with a riot of savage greenery. And directly before me, kilometers from any sign of civilization, sits a surfer type with a neon orange tent, his hair so sun-bleached that his brows and lashes all but disappear on his face.

His name is Grigori.

And while I arrived on the lonely patch of Uluwatu via a five-minute ride on a reopened private funicular, this wayward Russian made his way down to the beach by sneaking through one of the far resorts and clambering down the rough-hewn stone stairs. When I ask if he’s even allowed here, he gestures pointedly to the empty expanse.

“Do you see anyone to stop me?”

Rough and rugged, Uluwatu still resembles the tropical fever dream that Bali once was.

Not that there aren’t cushy amenities. Somewhere on the top of those bluffs sits the eco-gorgeous Alila Uluwatu and the Bulgari Resort Bali, where I am staying. Much to my surprise, the latter is a study in understatement that has little to do with its ostentatious name. Yes, the spa is an intricate, century-old *joglo* house imported piece-by-piece from Java and painstakingly reassembled on this 160-meter drop-off overlooking the Indian Ocean. But call it a superlative example of the emphasis on local materials here.

*Bukit*, the same kind of coral stone used in many Balinese temples, and *bangkiray*, a type of mahogany from Java, dominate the all-villa landscape. The resort sports brand-new three- and five-bedroom mansions larger than most boutique hotels with interiors dripping in Italian onyx, but from the outside even these exceedingly luxe abodes are moss-covered and subdued. More than 1,500 ceramics and 80 objets d’art ranging from the Stone Age pieces to the one-tonne copper sculpture by contemporary Balinese artist Made Wianta dot the 8.5 hectares. Textiles called *songket*, made of gold and silver threads in silk and requiring four months to handweave, decorate virtually every room.

Lovely as the resort is, it’s that view and this coastline that steal the show. So transfixed am I by the scenery that I fail to notice the steady advance of the sea. By the time I turn around, the beach behind me has vanished into saline foam. The biblical waves that made this area so beloved by boarders come ever closer. I begin to crawl my way back, bruising each time my body slams against the cliffs, fully clothed and drenched through skin and bone.

“Time to make everything change. In the fields, where another Ritz-Carlton is going to be, I used to cut the grass for the cow,” chef Suriana told me back when I first landed. “But something of the old stays, even when the new comes. I still have my village. I told my father, ‘Bring my kid and take him to the rice field.’ I want him to play in the mud there as I did. I want him to know where he comes from.”

That it is still possible for the youngest generation to free-play in the paddies like their parents did, to even here on the Uluwatu shore find a place this wild, to be half-terrified and fully alive, is truly something. Salt-crusted and wind-battered, I hold tight and let the next wave come. +

## T+L Guide

### 🏠 STAY

**The Ritz-Carlton, Bali** 3 Jln. Raya Nusa Dua Selatan, Sawangan Nusa Dua; 62-361/849-8988; ritzcarlton.com; doubles from US\$430.

**Softel Bali Nusa Dua Beach Resort** N5 Jln. Nusa Dua, Kawasan Wisata Nusa Dua tourism complex; 62-361/849-2888; softel.com; doubles from Rp2,160,000.

**Bulgari Resort Bali** Jalan Goa Lempeh, Banjar Dinas Kangin, Uluwatu; 62-361/847-1000; bulgarihotels.com; villas from US\$1,000, three-bedroom mansions from US\$8,000, five-bedroom mansions from US\$10,000.

**The Sakala Resort & Villa Bali** 95 Jln. Pratama, Tanjung Benoa, Nusa Dua; 62-361/775-216; sakalaresortbali.com; doubles from US\$191.

**Inaya Putri Bali** Traditional Balinese style infuses every bit of this stylish newcomer.

S3 Kawasan Wisata Nusa Dua; 62-361/774-488; inayahotels.com; doubles from US\$140.

### 🍷 EAT AND DRINK

**Warung Pak Dobeil** 9 Jln.

Srikandi, Nusa Dua; 62-361/771-633; babi guling for two Rp60,000.

**Warung Merta Sari Buana** 9 Jln. Srikandi, Nusa Dua; 62-361/778-278; nasi ayam campur for two Rp40,000.

**Warung Nasi Ayam Ibu Oki** 27 Jln. Siligita, Nusa Dua; 62-361/805-2059; nasi ayam campur for two Rp40,000.

**Bumbu Bali One** It may cater to international guests, but that doesn't make the food at this iconic Indonesian restaurant from cookbook author Heinz von Holzen any less authentic or enjoyable. Bumbu Bali One and Two are located within a kilometer of one another on the same street and sport identical menus, though the former has a

bit more ambience. Order the rijstaffel for the full experience. Jalan Pratama, Tanjung Benoa; 62-361/774-502; balifoods.com; rijstaffel menus from Rp550,000.

**The Beach Grill** Simple, beautifully executed seafood dishes overlooking the Indian Ocean. Order the lobster linguine. The Ritz-Carlton, Bali; ritzcarlton.com; dinner for two Rp765,000.

**Il Ristorante** Contemporary spins on Tuscan classics from chef Nicola Russo. Bulgari Resort Bali; bulgarihotels.com; four-course tasting menu Rp850,000.

**Nikki Beach Bali** Every day is a party, but in laid-back Nusa Dua it tends not to run late. Though the club stays open well into the night for special events, on regular days it shuts its doors at 7 p.m. Sunday brunch is well worth getting out of bed for, both for the spectacular spread

and people-watching. Softel Bali Nusa Dua Beach Resort; 62-361/849-2900; nikkibeach.com; Amazing Sunday Brunch Rp350,000.

### 🏠 DO

**Cooking class** The Ritz-Carlton, Bali; ritzcarlton.com; cooking class with lunch US\$90.

**L'Atelier Parfums et Créations** The Ritz-Carlton, Bali; 62-361/849-8988 ext. 3941; perfumeworkshops.com; 90-minute workshop and 30 milliliters of custom perfume US\$80.

**Vietura** Softel Bali Nusa Dua Beach Resort; 62-361/849-2988; facebook.com/VieturaAestheticLifestyleBali; one-hour Micro Exfoliation facial US\$60.

**The Spa** Bulgari Resort Bali; 62-361/847-1000 ext. 6601-6602; bulgarihotels.com; two-hour Balinese Four Hand Massage US\$325.



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