

Almost Amalfi

Bali's Bukit Peninsula feels like a Mediterranean transplant, reports Susan Kurosawa | *April 25, 2009*

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THE jaunty little white carriage sweeps down its inclinator track to the sandy-toed Nammos Beach Club. There's a bamboo sling roof, wood-fired brick oven and calamari on the menu. Surely this is not Bali but the Greek isles; if Tom Conti's character from Shirley Valentine were to suddenly appear and start chatting up wan ladies of a certain age, I would not feel the slightest jolt of dislocation.



Breakfast in Karma Kandara's open-sided Di Mare restaurant

The dramatic limestone cliffs that plunge 100m into the ocean could be repositioned from the Mediterranean. Lofty places such as Positano or the isle of Capri spring to mind with their cliff-face elevators and funiculars and excitable bathing parties. Putting Conti out of mind for a moment, I want to sing Funiculi, Funicula and madly wave my arms.

It is quite possible no other guests at Karma Kandara resort at Uluwatu on Bali's Bukit Peninsula are having this reaction. Most are eating superb nasi goreng for breakfast and readjusting their batik-patterned sarongs in preparation for the beach. Apparently the architects and designers claim the Med vibe is all just a happy opera of site and stone, elevation and dramatic views, rather than a deliberate style ethos.

Indeed, the 46-villa hideaway does not neglect Indonesian architectural and design references. It is just not Bali as I know it.

To explain: set in a white-painted cliffside building 150m above the water, Karma Kandara's signature restaurant is the semicircular Di Mare, all pastel blue and coolly fashionable, with an enfilade of pillars and a moulded canopy roof. One side opens to the sea and sky; Cafe del Mar compilations provide the moody soundtrack and the food does a carousel of the planet, from risotto to Asian noodles.

Above breezy Di Mare sits Temple Lounge, a Moroccan-inspired rooftop terrace with cushioned cabanas, ottomans and Arabian glass lanterns. This is the sunset-worship spot, with a lemongrass martini to hand. Marrakech meets Mykonos, I write in my notebook, feeling slightly dizzy. Then I look up and a sacred Hindu temple is perched a little above us, ornately carved and draped with fruit offerings and prayer flags.

Karma Kandara's freestanding villas are set along serpentine pathways walled with coralline stone. Each of these habitats comes with a vivid wooden gate -- red, aquamarine, bright yellow or blue -- and an urn of magenta or apricot bougainvillea that adds another shock of colour. So it could be Santorini, I decide, despite the lack of donkeys.

Once inside the accommodation, the standard Asian resort design code applies -- the light and airy flow of interconnected pavilions, smooth stone and marble surfaces, plentiful use of varnished teak and apposite artefacts -- and beyond sits a blue and inviting private plunge pool and lounging pavilion with pitched roof of alang-alang grass. The colour theme is chocolate, cinnamon and burnt orange; framed in windows are bursts of glossy foliage. (Note that not all villas have ocean views and some are far less private than others in terms of nudging neighbours; three-bedroom villa 10 is about the best pick.)

But despite the high level of comfort here, it's really about the elevated location and those sensational 180-degree ocean views from the restaurant, bars and spa. "What's out there?" I ask general manager Greg Liddell as we survey the bright blue infinity of the Indian Ocean. "Darwin," he says.

THE Bukit Peninsula sits on Bali's hem, at the western corner of its southernmost coastline. If we imagine Bali's shape as vaguely fishlike, the Bukit is its bottom fin. This slightly removed rudder of a region has been slow to develop its tourism potential and one can understand the reticence of developers to take on massive projects that obviously require so much engineering.

Wild boar and water buffalo roamed this dry and stunted limestone plateau in times past and rajas roamed with their hunting parties popping off the pheasants. Before resort development started here earlier this decade, cassava and seaweed were the only crops and stone was mined from vast quarries. That same limestone karst now adorns the interiors and foyers of the Bukit's five-star villas and resorts.

Surfers have long been privy to the Bukit's charms. Here are Bali's best breaks, with names as graphic as Impossibles; Bill Leimbach's documentary *Balinese Surfer*, made in the early 1970s, was shot around the Bukit, encouraging legions of young Australians to grab their boards and head off. Uluwatu is also home to one of Bali's most important temples, the 11th-century Pura Luhur. Poised on a cliff, this is where fishermen come to honour the goddess of the sea and pray for good catches.

Rampaging development aside, this region presents a very different side of Bali. Even the sense of getting there from Denpasar airport or the familiar beach enclaves of Kuta and Sanur seems like a 45-minute mini-expedition, via villages and vignettes of rural life, down bumpy tracks, past loitering dogs and chickens and then, like being fed into a funnel, the soaring coastline opens up with its billion-dollar panoramas.

THE Karma group is owned by former rock music promoter John Spence and his philosophy has been simple: provide not just a room but a genuine holiday house within a resort. So whether you're travelling as a couple and have booked a one-bedroom villa, or you're staying family-style in a two or three-bedroom configuration, the basics are uniform. There's an equipped kitchen (staff will also barbecue dinner, should you choose), laundry facilities, hectares of lounging space, and in-villa meals and housekeeping on call.

Spence's other Karma resort properties are on the island of Koh Samui in southern Thailand and at Jimbaran Bay near Denpasar airport in Bali. A Karma Margaret River in the West Australian wine region and Bali's Karma Agung will be next to open.

It doesn't seem like rocket science to provide a product that combines coveted luxury and practicality. But Spence maintains he could never find what he wanted when travelling through Asia with his family, didn't like interconnecting hotel rooms, and so he developed the Karma blueprint according to his needs.

It works extremely well. We visit as a family in house-party holiday style and are lucky with the weather. It's March, at the tail of the wet season, but the expected thunderstorms are scarce. When they do come, the rain is sharp and shiny and then the sky clears, the vegetation all refreshed and purring.

That most convivial of wet-weather standbys, the spa, does good business: such good business, in fact, that plans are apace for expansion along the clifftop. Kandara Spa is a small complex in a precipitous position, comprised of a series of shacks (the designers prefer the term healing huts but I like the more lowly description, which suits these small and jauntily angled timber treatment rooms).

The spa menu includes the latest oxygen facials and therapies using marine ingredients such as sea salt and wild kelp. On one ledge sits an infrared glass-walled sauna designed to detox and regenerate city-bloated bodies. I complete the 30-minute session, designed to "increase blood and nutrient supply to the capillaries through increased circulation, leaving the skin radiant and fresh". I then undo all the goodness with seafood pizza and Bintang beer at Nammos Beach Club, but not before a soak in the sauna's adjacent saltwater regeneration pool. All but hanging off the cliff, I feel as if I am about to float towards the horizon with the buoyancy of a pool toy.

The night skies are clear and starry, a full moon hangs like a pendant and the letter K is shaped each evening on the sand by dozens of lanterns. Over a six-night stay, we sleep to the skirl of the sea on stormy nights and wake to sunshine and our customary order of freshly foamed pineapple juice. We learn the names of the Balinese staff and become increasingly adept at walking up and down the resort's higgledy-piggledy stone steps and across footbridges that span deep, narrowing gullies. We are greeted at every turn by straw-hatted gardeners pruning tropical bushes that seem to grow bigger each time we blink. All is creeping and climbing, fabulously fecund and populated by forest monkeys that play like aerial gymnasts on the roofs of the spa huts (that's when they are not skipping about, eyeing off fruit bowls through the glass doorways of Karma Kandara's villas).

After a week we are chillaxed, as I am told the verbs to chill and to relax are fashionably merged these days. My hallucinations about the clash of continents have ceased to matter. Call it the Mediterranean or southern Bali, heaven needs no address.

Checklist

Karma Kandara is running a 12 Days of Yoga with Jessie Chapman retreat from June 11 to 22. Chapman is an Australian yoga teacher and author, and the program includes daily communal classes. Other Karma spa retreats include four-night/five-day Martini&Manicure retreats that combine detox juices and healthy fare, with spa indulgences and cocktails. (By spring 2009, Karma Spas will be chemical-free environments, including organic linens and uniforms, amenities and cleaning fluids.)

Packages from \$US674 (\$935) a night for one-bedroom villas to \$US995 for three-bedroom villas (sleep six), including breakfast and extras. Karma Resorts is a member of the Leading Small Hotels of the World Group. More: www.karmaresorts.com; www.karmakandara.com; www.lhw.com.

Garuda has launched its 2009 Bali on any Budget program, which includes stay-five-and-pay-for-four-night deals (also stay 10 and pay for eight) at Karma Kandara, valid from May 1 for selected periods. More: www.balionanybudget.com.au.

The big and the beautiful

AS Bali's tourism industry booms once more, there is abundant development on the Bukit Peninsula, some of it seemingly inappropriate in size and scale.

The prime offender is the 400ha Pecatu Indah resort, residential villa complex and golf course overlooking the so-called New Kuta Beach (previously known, and loved, by surfers as Dreamland). It bills itself as "the most beautiful investment in the world".

Tommy Suharto, disgraced son of the former Indonesian president, out of jail after serving just a quarter of his sentence for murder, owns the land and the development has been on and off for decades, stalled by claims of corruption and land-grabbing.

Aside from Karma Kandara, the 59-villa Bulgari Resort Bali is the best-known of the international luxury spreads in the precinct. Singapore-headquartered Banyan Tree plans to open its Ungasan property in the third quarter of this year; its sister operation, Angsana Resort & Spa Bali, occupies 4ha of clifftop on the Bukit's southern extremity, a position touted as Millionaires' Row.

Other luxe properties to watch include the new Alila Villas at Uluwatu and the five-suite Istana marketed via www.uluwatuvillasonline.com.

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