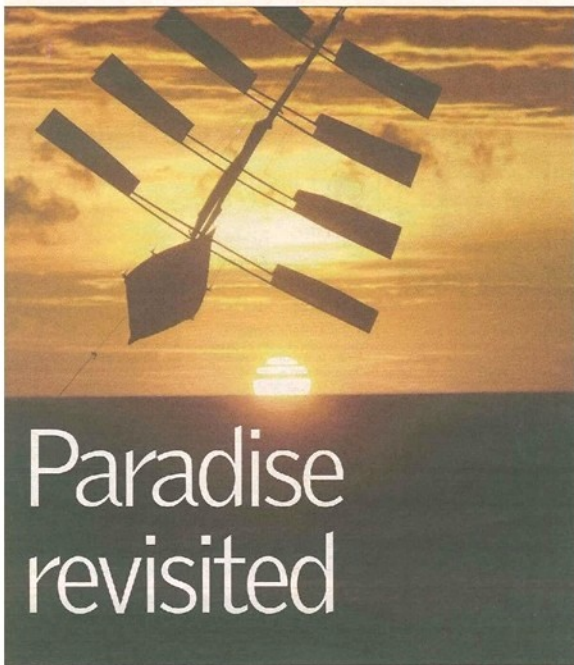




# Paradise revisited

A quarter-century after her first sun-kissed encounter, **Robin Bower** returns to Bali where the smiles are just as bright even if the visitor's eye has dimmed.

Photograph above: The beauty of Ku De Ta at sunset.

**T**wenty-five years ago on my first visit to Bali (and first visit anywhere), I stepped off the plane into a tropical paradise heavy with the scent of unknown experiences, a virgin in a virgin paradise. The party started on the plane with the mobile cocktail bar rocking in economy. Young men abounded; their first act on Balinese soil being to strip off the Perth clothes and kick back in sarong and "Don't drink the water, fish f... in it" T-shirt.

Thoughts were of meeting boys, partying the night away, drinking as many cocktails as we could, tasting my first orange juice blissed with magic mushrooms, and getting high — something I never would have contemplated at home. Everyone, Balinese and foreigner, was any age and the potential for romance was off the Richter scale. No thought of helmets, we jumped on random motorbikes to be taken by young Aussie men to heavenly nightclubs

with exotic names like Rumi Jung and the less exotic Matilda's where the main attraction was the wet T-shirt competition.

Aussies were everywhere and there was a 99 per cent chance you'd meet the boy next door. This was a rite of passage for Perth girls.

At the risk of sounding like a jaded expat overcooked with living in Hong Kong and the cry of "You can't get good help anymore", times have changed in Bali as they inexorably do. But is it Bali that has changed, or me?

These days no one walks on the footpaths due to having to climb over gaping holes plunging to a watery drain below at every second step. The pavement rises and falls continuously with the hapless pedestrian having to dodge rubbish, piles of dirt, broken slabs or dog feces. The young riders of today are more safety-conscious and usually obey the mandatory rule about wearing helmets but there are still no road rules, and



Clouds gather at Jemuruk Beach. Pictures: Robin Bower

everyone's still called Ketut or Made.

Miscellaneous, I can cross the road untouched because the motorbikes and taxis quickly swerve to avoid me.

Every Balinese is the same age as I was when I first came; it's only me who has aged. They pass with huge smiles and "Good morning, where you from?" echoes on every street corner. Most foreigners, those who risk the ever-present danger of walking on the footpaths, don't even make eye contact, Australian or not.

Instead of young people jostling on postcards of sun-filled days and fluid-filled nights, they are tapping away on laptops at cafes with free wi-fi access. Gone are the days of recounting the night's activities to the person next to you. Rather, write to the overseas friend who can't be here to share the experience. There are still cries of "transport", "taxi", "DVD", "CD" while trying to

have a peaceful lunch but these days one "go away, please" will suffice. The latest "promotion" is the offer of a free gift (which turns out to be one of three items: a laptop, \$1000 or a free week in Bali — "You are so lucky"; if you turn up to a 45-minute presentation on something (probably a vacation club). Having been duped by this at home, I'm immediately not interested. The young man who has stopped me on the street via motorbike has a sad expression saying he will get \$50 if I go to the presentation, no obligation. The bait doesn't hook me and I apologise for his loss.

If the prospect of Bali really worries you, come to Seminyak

and feast in one of the many international restaurants offering every type of cuisine.

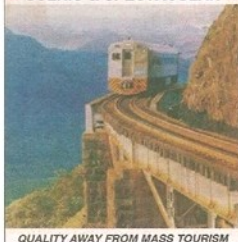
The restaurant scene in Bali has evolved with the world's best chefs providing top-quality choices. Try the best first, Ku De Ta, a French fusion mix with minimalist design and fabulous courtyard overlooking the sea. Hang out here every day at sunset with a fiendishly expensive cocktail (\$8) and check out the beautiful people as we all watch the sun disappear over the sea. You could be in Cannes or Monaco encountering myriad nationalities.

Or eat at La L'uccella, a magnificent two-storey Italian restaurant in traditional Balinese bumbong right on the beach. The Living Room is a delicious step into a Somerset Maugham story — huge ceilings, chandeliers, silver service, a sparkling heavenly garden dotted with tealights and party-in-your-mouth delicacies. A sophisticated sleek bar adjoins the main restaurant and opens smoothly until 5am. Or go to the Ha'u Bar if you're into electronic, house or jazz into the wee hours.

In a word, Bali has gone up-market. Of course, you can still taste the delights of the old Bali but there is so much more in 2008. The great things are still there: the smiles of the people, carfree walks back to the villa in the darkest of lanes, cheap and good massages, hot languid days, top-class restaurants at low prices, sunsets, beach and water frolicking, island hopping, freedom.

Bali still holds that old charm and, like fine wine, we've both got better with age.

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