

Hip, hitched, hooray

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Upmarket and exciting: Space Villas, Seminyak

Aussie brides choose Bali to wed over any other destination. Ian Lloyd Neubauer reveals the island's most popular venues to say I do.

Bali is the No.1 destination for Australians marrying overseas. And for an added bonus, you're already at one of the world's great honeymoon destinations.

The most daunting thing about getting married in Bali is the incredible diversity of venues to choose from. From glass-encased villas with 360-degree ocean views, to botanical gardens edged by rainforest, to ancient Hindu temples that look like movie sets, Bali is a wedding planner's dream.

To help you plan yours, we list five very different venues at very different price points at five different parts of the island.

Space Villas @ Seminyak

Just north of the airport on Bali's west coast, Seminyak is reckoned to be the most upmarket and exciting part of the island. Home to legendary beach club Kudeta, high-end boutiques such as Horn Emporium, bargain-priced spas such as Bodyworks and world-class restaurants such as Metis, Seminyak is the place to be in Bali.

Seminyak has dozens of top-tier hotels - the W, the Legian and the Sea Sentosa Resort among others. But for a more intimate wedding or honeymoon experience, try a private villa with butler service and private pool.

"The villa business is extremely popular in Bali and there are now hundreds of them here, but they tend to be a bit hit and miss," says Stephen Michie, manager of Space Villas, a series of one- and two-bedroom villas located behind Seminyak Beach.

"You may find a stunning villa in the middle of a rice field but they may not have a back-up generator in case the power goes out, or the internet's no good, or the staff don't speak English - things that can put a damper on your stay."

Space Villa offers three- and five-day wedding packages that as a minimum include a celebrant, civil registrar, all the paperwork and VIP wedding staff. Ceremonies can be private and low-key or outrageous and loud with all the bells and whistles included: flower girls, Balinese dancers and a band, and even a whole roasted pig with an apple in its mouth if you fancy.

Sea Sentosa @ Canggu

Half an hour's drive from Seminyak but a million metaphorical miles away, the village on Bali's mid-west coast is the place of choice for expats living on the island. Think paddy-fields interspersed with Hindu temples, traditional Balinese homes and a growing number of luxury villas, restaurants, bars, yoga

studios and boutiques. Throw in Echo Beach - one of the world's most famous surfing spots - and you've got a wedding and holiday destination writ large.

Due to open in Canggu in time for the high season in July, Sea Sentosa is going to be epic. Its 150 apartments and penthouses come with private infinity-edged pools, sun decks and "vertical gardens" grown on walls. Guests will have three Olympic-size swimming pools, a cabana-lined lagoon pool, a beach club, restaurants, cafes, bars, a retail precinct and a medical centre.

"We received our first bookings for weddings months before we opened," chief executive Ian Duffell says. "From what I understand, it's hard to find a venue in Bali that can cater to a large number of guests. Our beach club can seat 500 people in a seafront setting and we can cater to wedding parties of just about any size. We've got a hairdressing salon, a beauty salon and spa - and pastry chefs to make your dream wedding cake, and our own photographers. It's a one-stop for getting married in Bali."

Alam Asmara @ Candidasa

Looking directly onto the translucent blue waters on Bali's south-east coast, Candidasa is the Bali of yesteryear - a tranquil fishing village reminiscent of Seminyak in the 1980s. Diving and snorkelling are the main attractions here, but it's also a great place for honeymoons and small weddings.

A luxury dive resort and romantic hideaway, Candidasa's Alam Asmara Dive Resort has 12 luxury bungalows wrapped in fishponds, a spa, dive shop, infinity-edged seafront pool and a seafront restaurant that's all about fresh seafood. Try the pan-seared mahi-mahi, or the oven-baked snapper and lobster with Balinese herbs and spices - and that's just the entree.

Alam Asmara's wedding packages are exceptionally well priced. They include three nights in three bungalows, airport

transfers, breakfast, a blessing ceremony, spa treatment and make-up for the bride, flower arrangements, fruit baskets, a wedding cake, photography, a celebrant and all the legal stuff.

"We do secular weddings but it's much more fun to do a Balinese one," manager Ida Bagus Widana says. "We fit the bride and groom in traditional dress and invite a symbolic Hindu priest, and of course it includes the wedding procession with 11 flower girls and all the offerings for the ceremony.

"The wedding usually takes place by the pool, but we can do it anywhere - on the beach, there are so many places to choose from, or in the Tirtaganga Water Palace if they like, it's very beautiful there. We take the bride and groom to Denpasar to sign all the papers and make it official. We've only done seven weddings so far, but they all came out perfectly. It made all of us very happy here."

Murni's Houses @ Ubud

Set in a velvet-green valley in south-central Bali, Ubud is the spiritual capital of the island. Like something out of a Rudyard Kipling novel, the town is overflowing with Hindu temples - thousands in fact.

Don't miss the lotus pond-ensconced Pura Saraswati temple, which is next door to a Starbucks, or the Gunung Kawi archaeological park half an hour out of town. And while it's a no-brainer destination for Hindu weddings, this moss-covered fairytale of a place is also a popular destination for Christian weddings.

The best place to have a meal is Murni's Warung. A four-story open-air eatery and bar overlooking a jungle-clad bend of the Campuan River, it was the first restaurant to open in Ubud, way back in 1974.

A few blocks away is Murni's Houses, a traditional Balinese compound with four temple-like houses and an award-winning day spa set in a pixie's garden.

"Why get married in Ubud? For starters it's more traditional and authentically Balinese," says owner Murni who, like many Indonesians, goes by one name only.

"And it's cooler than the coast, which can be very hot. But the main difference is the scenery - many people like the backdrop of rice terraces for the ceremony.

"I've lost count of how many weddings we've done over the years," Murni says. "I enjoyed them all, but the most memorable was the first, as I wasn't sure we could do it. I was more nervous than the bride.

"We set the place up beautifully for the wedding by the pool: lots of tropical flower arrangements, tall Balinese umbrellas, ritual offerings and an antique table for the wedding book. Then it poured down. We quickly had to change everything, and then have the ceremony in my living room.

"But it all went well. And it gave us the confidence we could do weddings well, because we could deal with the unexpected."

Ayana @ Jimbaran Bay

You know you've made it when you stroll into the Ayana Resort and Spa's voluminous lobby, where sheets of marble tumble down into swimming pools and fountain walls. Set on 30 hectares of land on a cliff overlooking Jimbaran Bay, this 290-room, 78-villa property is more than luxury - it's over the top.

Ayana's Thermes Marins Spa, home to the world's largest aquatronic therapy pool, has won a range of industry awards. Its cliff-top watering hole, the aptly named Rock Bar, is recognised as one of the best venues in the world for a sunset drink, and its restaurants are world-class. The Italian eatery Sami Sami dishes out wood-fired pizzas and spinach ravioli. Dava, a French-Asian eatery run by celebrated Singaporean chef Jusman So, does a mushroom cappuccino that defies description. There's a fitness centre, tennis court, golf putting course, a perfumery where you can make your own scent,

cooking classes, a children's club and a private beach.

"Our point of distinction is the choice we offer in terms of venues," spokeswoman Marian Carroll says. "We have six - two glass chapels with ocean views and four garden venues, one that's got a canopy of 2000 white frangipanis. And because the resort is so big, all these venues are private.

"We have 20 full-time wedding planners, an in-house bridal boutique, and even a grand ballroom for large affairs. And if your guests are up for it, the party can continue at the Rock Bar until the early hours of the morning."

Trip notes

Getting there

Garuda Indonesia flies direct from Sydney to Denpasar in Bali from \$940 economy return. 1300 365 330, garuda-indonesia.net.au.

Staying there

Space Villas, Jalan Drupadi, 8 Seminyak, Bali. One-room villa for \$272 a night, two-bedroom villa for \$367. +62 361 731 100, spaceatbali.com.

Ayana Resort, Jalan Karang Mas Sejahtera, Jimbaran, Bali. Standard rooms from \$228 a night and villas cost from \$731 a night. +62 361 170 2222, ayanaresort.com.

Murni's Houses, Jalan Raya Ubud, Bali. Suites from \$76 and two-bed houses from \$132. +62 361 975 165, murnis.com.

Alam Asmara Dive Resort, Jalan Raya, Candidasa, Suites cost from \$79 a night. +62 361 752 520, alamasmara.com.

Sea Sentosa, Jalan Pantai Sentosa, Echo Beach, Bali. One-bedroom apartments from \$225 a night and three-bedroom penthouses with private pool from \$1500. +62 361 888 1234, seasentosa.com.

Marrying there

Religious and civil weddings between Australian nationals aged 18 and over in Bali are recognised in Australia. To make it official, you'll have to visit the Australian Consulate in Denpasar, present ID, fill out a bunch of forms and pay \$110 in Indonesian rupiah. bali.indonesia.embassy.gov.au — click on "services for Australians".

The Department of Foreign Affairs recommends Australians wishing to marry in Bali engage an agent to liaise with the local bureaucrats, ministers, florists and photographers, such as Bali Tie D'Knot (bali-weddingplanner.com), Bali Mystical Weddings (balimystical.com) and Bali Wedding Butler (baliweddingbutler.com).