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Bali villa a luxurious spot for shared family vacation

All the amenities you could want in a lush setting

Michael Chisholm, Special to The Vancouver Sun

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'Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada advises against non-essential travel to Indonesia, including Bali ... due to the current threat of terrorist attack against Western interests.... Terrorist attacks can occur at any time and in any location, including Bali.'

Of all the great vacation destinations in the world, what sane person would even consider Bali after this warning? Bali, however, is where my wife and I and our three-year old daughter took our February vacation. Our destination: a Balinese villa in the Seminyak region.

We left Vancouver in the snow for the long ride across the Pacific. It was a trip we faced with apprehension. How would our three-year-old handle the 16-hour flight? Our airline made that easy. Within minutes of settling in our seats, Singapore Air flight attendants delivered a Dora the Explorer game package that entertained Coreana for hours. For a three-year old, the rush of take-off, the thrill of new surroundings, the ice-packs of the ocean below the snowy white clouds, and the rhythmic vibration of a long flight soon had her as settled as a seasoned traveler. As a back up, in-seat children's videos took over. This vacation was getting off to a good start.

In Bali, our goal was to meet up with old friends and their young families, and to spend time truly relaxing with no worries about day to day chores of cooking and cleaning. The women in our group were former travel journalists who became best friends during their global ramblings for a Singapore television station. Since then, all have moved on to new lives, new careers, and new countries. Internet chatting and emails can only go so far, so plans were laid three years ago to meet up in person, somewhere, in 2008.

Our original destination was Italy. Then, through a Vancouver friend, we heard about villas in Bali. With a little research, we discovered villa life is booming in Bali, as more people seek out unique, non-hotel experiences in the Indonesian provincial paradise. For several families traveling together, it is a smart choice.

"You're sharing a family space in a luxury hotel setting" says Ian Macaulay, president of Elite Havens, a Balinese villa rental and sales agency. The Montreal-born businessman moved to Bali in 2000 and has been involved in the growing villa market ever since.

Our group booked six days in The Maharaj Villa in Seminyak. The Maharaj is a four-and-a-half bedroom villa located in a central area of Seminyak, close, but not too close, to the noisy and famous Kuta Beach, the site of a 2002 terrorist bombing. The villa sits in a lush green space, behind high walls guaranteeing privacy and security.

The well-kept grounds inside the walls contain a two-storey, two-bedroom main house, a two-bedroom guesthouse, a 16-metre curved swimming pool and a large open-air living and dining room that opens on to the pool, allowing for al fresco dining and chatting well into the warm night. The large dining room table seats 10. And the villa comes with satellite television, CD and DVD players and a library.

The builders incorporated the natural environment into the design, allowing for more light through open spaces, using trees and bushes to provide cover for necessary equipment like the pool filtration system.

The villa comes with a full-time house manager, a cook, cleaning staff, security and drivers. During our stay, their presence was discreet, courteous and professional. The Balinese are famous for their cheerful, easy-going manner, and it was evident in all our dealings with the local staff. They love children and were more than willing to provide babysitting and life guarding duties at any time.

This was my second trip to Bali. Several years ago, I and another Vancouver friend spent two weeks surfing the breaks around the island. I was fascinated with the place and had been yearning to return. A family vacation allowed me to experience another side of life there.

Bali is a lush, tropical island just north of the equator. It is one of Indonesia's 33 provinces. The "Island of the Gods" is home, amid a sea of Islam, to a unique strain of Hinduism, which still considers its two island volcanoes sacred. This religious devotion is evident all over the island, from small personal offerings on sidewalks to ancient temples scattered around the island. Despite the peaceful and bucolic nature of Bali, the island was the site of two terrorist bombings in 2002 and 2005 that killed 220 and injured more than 300. It immediately resulted in a hit to the crucial Australian tourism market.

The tide, however, has been turning, and visitors are again returning to the island renowned for its dance, sculpture, music and arts.

Our group spent a day in Ubud, the creative and artistic capital of Bali, roaming the markets for gifts and enjoying the high-quality arts and low-cost fare at excellent restaurants. The nearby Monkey Forest was too much to resist, and we joined a throng of tourists wandering through the paved jungle pathways, feeding bananas to the monkeys. One piece of advice: Watch out for their long tails! By mistake, one of our group stepped on a young monkey's tail, and within seconds, two mature male monkeys

attacked, biting Geoff in the buttock and leg, requiring a quick trip to a medical clinic for treatment.

Back at the villa, and far from the angry monkeys, it was time for aperitifs, while children played in the pool. During this late-afternoon tranquility, our pre-ordered dinner arrived on a platter: Balinese roast pig. In Indonesian, this specialty is called "babi guling." One of the major advantages of villa life is the in-house cook and a meal menu from which to choose. Although we paid extra for the shopping and food costs, it was worth every penny.

While most of our breakfasts were Western, we stuck to Indonesian fare such as nasi goreng, beef rendang and sate ayam for lunch and supper. On this occasion, our dinner was carried in fully roasted from head to swirly tail.

This was vacation living at its best. While cooks carved the babi guling and prepared several other chicken and rice side dishes, we continued to relax, then dress for our feast. Local wines are rare, but we found some overpriced Australian wine in a nearby grocery store.

The babi guling was excellent. Again, the villa staff made everything perfect. For each meal, they prepare the food, provide table and corking service, and do all the cleaning afterwards. The kitchen is open to all guests, who can indulge in mid-day or late-night snacking.

The in-house cook and attentive villa staff is what sets a villa apart from a hotel vacation.

The cost of a Balinese villa is more than a hotel, but that is easily outweighed by the benefits and the ability to share the cost. The Maharaj cost \$450 US a night, split among four families. We were in Bali during the low season, which coincides nicely with the Canadian winter. Many other villas rent in the \$550 a night range to as high as \$1,200 for the luxury villas.

"I have stayed at backpacker hostels and posh hotels in Bali and the villa by far is my best experience," said Priscilla Hon, one of our friends along on the trip.

Lian Foong-Siddle, another friend, along on the trip with her husband Geoff, added "I would recommend it to families [with children] below 12 or with children who are good at occupying themselves quietly.

I think the average 12-, 13- or 16-year-old might find staying in the villa a little stifling. Where are the bikes, the beach, the crazy slides and the disco and bar of a normal hotel? "

The villa experience is ideal for families with young children. We had high chairs, cribs and extra beds standing by when we arrived. And with the bedrooms so close, young children can go to bed early, leaving parents within earshot, and still able to spend time together in the open-air living room with their friends, enjoying a drink, the warm

evening air and the sounds of a tropical night, far from the wind and snow of a Canadian winter.

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If You Go

The official currency of Indonesia is the Rupiah, which is used in every establishment. Money from most countries can be exchanged at numerous small exchange houses in tourist areas. The market is competitive, so shop around.

GETTING THERE: Singapore Airlines has direct flights from Vancouver to Denpasar, with a stopover in Singapore. Other Asian airlines like JAL also offer flights from Vancouver, via Narita.

WHERE TO STAY: We stayed at The Maharaj Villa in Seminyak. US\$450/night. Four and a half bedrooms plus many extras. (www.the-maharaj-bali.com) or for other family villas: www.elitehavens.com . Additional beds in the villa will cost extra. And remember: a tip for the 12-member staff is expected at the end of your stay.

GETTING AROUND: Cabs are the easiest, but remember to insist the driver use his meter. The Maharaj comes with a driver and vehicle for an extra cost. Remember to book in advance.

THINGS TO KNOW: Special order foods, like babi guling, require one-day advance booking. Groceries can be purchased by villa staff but be aware, there is usually a 20 per cent mark-up. Staff will prepare Western food unless otherwise instructed. Restaurants are plentiful and most are cheap, especially with the strong Canadian dollar. A Balinese masseuse is a phone call away -- and does house calls.