



# BALI BY BIKE

Scooters and motorbikes have long been a favoured form of transport in Bali. But, as Fiona Harper discovers, cycling the backroads and laneways offer an intriguing glimpse into little-seen Bali far from its famed tourist trail.

WORDS AND PHOTOS **FIONA HARPER**

**I**'M THE FIRST to admit I'm never going to make the Olympic mountain biking team, no matter how much I aspire to sporting greatness. As much as I wish my riding style had that enviable 'flow' which mountain bikers aim for, the truth is I'm a numpty. I'm clueless. I barely know my *dérailleur* from my *derrière*. Oh, I can ride a bike, don't get me wrong. And I can mostly stay upright, keeping the rubber side down in mountain bike parlance. I once completed a challenging three-day stage race in South Africa without breaking either my bike or my bones. But that was likely more good luck than good fortune. Mountain biking requires dexterity and a certain amount of fearless derring-do – traits which I don't possess.

When I signed up for a mountain bike tour of Bali's backroads with Spice Roads Cycling, I hoped that I wasn't going to embarrass myself. Encouraged by its rating system, but so too the company's focus on active adventure combined with cultural immersion, I was optimistic that the ride was within my capabilities. Spice Roads rates its cycle tours from easy novice level (flat roads and non-technical jeep roads) through to advanced and expert (technical terrain and high altitude). Our seven-day sport-rated ride falls somewhere in between the two extremes.

### Back in the saddle

With a busy work schedule, I've hardly touched my bike in the past year and my limited time in the saddle shows. We ride along the ridges of Mt Batur before dropping down the flanks of the volcano which erupted most recently a mere 23 years ago. There's plenty of singletrack – uphill, downhill, and tight switchbacks which challenge my confidence. Within hours of saddling up I kiss the dirt as we careen down into the caldera. It's my own fault. I'm not bike fit. When we regroup with the support vehicle later, the gravel

rash and caked blood pooled down my right side elicits empathy amongst three fellow riders. Thankfully they are kind enough not to laugh as I ice my aching elbow and prise the stones embedded in the graze.

After cold drinks, bananas, and enough time to savour some respite from Bali's tropical heat, we saddle up again. Skirting around the reed-strewn shoreline of Danau (Lake) Batur we stop for lunch of nasi goreng and cold Bintang at a warung (local restaurant) whose tables sit atop a rickety jetty jutting precariously above the lake. By the time the backroads lead us through lava fields, and we meet up with the support van, I'm ready for dinner and a dip in the swimming pool high above the clouds at Prama Hotel in Kintamani.

### At the start line

Our mountain biking adventure began the previous day in Sanur (days one and seven are non-riding days). With Edy as our guide, and Made as driver, we've a support van large enough to carry five bikes (an extra one is for backup), four riders and our luggage. Made also ensures we've plenty of cold drinks and snacks at twice-daily checkpoints. After leaving Bali's notorious downtown traffic behind, we pass through Ubud – our final destination – towards the northeast where frequent volcanic activity underpins Indonesia's place on the Pacific Ocean's Ring of Fire. The peaks of Mt Agung, Mt Abang and Mt Batur are to be our constant companions over the coming week. Our route takes us from Mt Batur, along Amed's picturesque coastline where Mt Agung rises from the seabed towards Candi Dasa, finishing in Ubud, Bali's artistic and creative hub.

Robyn and Andy are a middle-aged couple from California on a three week-long soulful Balinese adventure celebrating a significant birthday. Paul is a seasoned cyclist from Melbourne just back from riding the Italian Alps. Our small group quickly bonds, and we



**Above right: Mt Batur, Mt Abang and Mt Agung are our constant companions as we skirt around their flanks.**

**Left: Coastal views near the village of Amed behind are a welcome distraction from relentless hill climbs.**

soon fall into a natural rhythm with Robyn and Paul up front and Andy and myself bringing up the rear at a more leisurely pace.

The fragrant waft of incense accompanies us as we ride through villages, dodging religious offerings along with dozing dogs, clucking chickens and neatly dressed schoolchildren. We veer around suspension-breaking potholes along with laid out rugs laden with drying rice kerbside. Everywhere, kids seem amused by our pedal-powered appearance, calling out 'hello hello' and waving confidently before collapsing together in fits of joyous laughter. We ride past cross-legged wood carvers hunched over teak logs, basket weavers interlacing dried bamboo reeds and buy artworks from a watercolour painter who sidles up politely while we take a break in the shade.

### It's all about balance

Balinese culture is deeply rooted in Hindu Dharma religion which honours the shadow and light in daily life. Belief is entrenched in all-important balance. The Balinese people's peaceable nature is supported by this acceptance of opposing forces such as joy and sorrow, benevolence, and maliciousness. Daily offerings (known as *canang sari*) are presented at extravagant temples or modest shrines to appease both good and bad spirits. Offerings may be

proffered in delicate woven baskets adorned with marigold flowers, incense, and parcels of rice, or as simple as a chunk of banana or a green coconut. Temples pop up in the most unexpected places. Sometimes rising from amidst the tufts of a rice field or chilli plantation, other times atop a remote summit on a volcanic crater rim. Every home has a temple of sorts.

One day near Mt Batur we stop to admire the offerings adorning a temple in preparation for upcoming ceremonies. On another we pass a procession with men and women exquisitely attired in traditional Balinese dress. Ceremonies are such an integral part of Balinese life that, despite the procession taking up half the road, no-one gets angry as the traffic peaceably sorts itself out.

Riding out from the beachfront village of Amed on day four I'm challenged again. The coastal views are spectacular as the road snakes around rocky headlands lined with open-sided restaurants promising seafood cuisine for guests ensconced in cliffside villas. On a sparkling Bali Sea far below, white-hulled outriggers bob at anchor, their colourful sails lashed to spars while snorkellers drift above coral reefs. With these clifftop views comes rolling terrain and little traffic. The hills are relentless, the heat is sapping and I'm soon struggling to keep up. My Garmin alerts me to a new ►



**Left: Refreshment stops provide picturesque photo opportunities.**

**Right: There's plenty of time to take in the views of Bali's famed rice fields.**

**Below: We ride through quiet villages where streets are lined with temples.**



**I saddle up again and continue towards Virgin Beach where a longed-for swim awaits.**

**We roll through plantations laden with tomatoes, corn, chillies and bananas.**

'personal best' with 754m of ascent. My back hurts. My butt aches. My energy level has plummeted.

**Challenges and cheers**

No self-respecting cyclist wants to call in the sag wagon, the sometimes-derogatory term used for a support vehicle which accompanies cyclists on long rides. The origin behind the term is uncertain. Some say it's derived from an acronym for a vehicle providing 'support and gear'. Others say it originated from distressed and weary cyclists trailing, or sagging, behind the peloton.

Less than 13km into an anticipated 35km ride to Perasi Beach, I'm ready to call in the sag wagon. What I really want to do is lay down my bike in despair and cry like a tantrum-throwing child. But my pride is no match for a pounding heart which Garmin also notes has pounded itself to a record high. I'm both embarrassed and guiltily relieved to admit defeat. As I reach the crescent of yet another hill, I tell Edy our guide that I'm cooked. I'm toast. I can't go on.

As the least experienced rider in the group, I'm heartened later when Paul confesses that he felt like 'crying like a baby' as day four's relentless hills took their toll. Later still he relents, admitting that this was his favourite day. "I really wanted to ride a lot, and though it was a hard ride, and the hills were nasty, it was very satisfying," he says, downing a satisfying Bintang beer beside the hotel pool.

Robyn, too, relishes the scenic ride as we meander through villages far from Bali's well-worn tourist trail. Where penned goats bleat and tethered doe-eyed cattle with glossy brindle coats graze



on grass. And kids raise their hands to high-five us alongside streetside vendors proffering mandarins and mangoes for sale.

'My favourite day was when we stopped near the temple where there was a big celebration and women in traditional dress were carrying enormous offerings on their heads,' Robyn says towards the end of the week. 'It was the same day we had lunch at the restaurant on the edge of the crater where the views were so beautiful.'

Some days we ride dusty tracks little wider than our wheels, giving way to farmers going to and from their crops on motorbikes. We roll through plantations laden with tomatoes, corn, chillies, and bananas. Other times we're skimming along dirt roads or skirting the ridges beneath a

leafy canopy while thick vegetation conceals steep slopes which drop away to unseen valleys far below. As we descend towards the coast, hillsides are splendidly terraced with rice fields in varying stages of maturation. Scarecrows flutter in the breeze to deter pests while farmers caked in knee-deep mud wrangle petrol-driven ploughs through fields fed by a complex network of irrigation channels.

But all that was after I'd called for the sag wagon.

**A will and a way**

Deflated by defeat, the trouble is, our support vehicle is supporting one of our group who has succumbed to a bout of dreaded 'Bali belly' and has wisely chosen not to ride. It will take many hours before driver Made has seen him safely to our next hotel and can return to collect me. But Edy, who has been guiding mountain bike tours around Bali for more than 10 years, has another plan. Within a few minutes of my throwing in the towel, he's negotiated with a shopkeeper for her husband to transport myself and my bike to a meeting point further along the road. Edy tells me cheerily to 'wait just a few minutes, her husband will drive you,' as he lifts my bike into the back of a pickup truck before rolling down the hill with the others. Sure enough, the husband soon arrives, gestures for me to get in the truck, offers me a cigarette, which I politely decline, and drives me over some of the more brutal hills before we all regroup a few kilometres later. I feel sufficiently rested to saddle up again and continue towards Virgin Beach where a longed-for ocean swim and lunch awaits at a beachside warung.

Edy proves himself to be a master at finding solutions, such as when we need to find a bathroom. Near Ubud we call into a pharmacy, where after a brief discussion with Edy gesticulating towards the oddly attired foreigners in lycra

and bike helmets, he ushers us towards a toilet in the rear of the clinic. Another time he knocks on the door of a small home and explains our need, before we're graciously escorted to the rear of the house, past barking dogs and crowing roosters to a squat toilet scented with the incense which permeates the air everywhere in Bali. I can't help wondering how this scenario would play out if I knocked on a stranger's door in my own country and asked to use their toilet. I suspect I'd be met with suspicion, if not downright disdain.

But not so in Bali. This up close and personal awareness is what endears me the most to Bali and its people. It's this same charm which lured American musician Michael Franti – a regular headline act at Byron Bay Bluesfest – to open a soulful retreat on the outskirts of Ubud. Soulshine Bali evolved from Franti and his wife Sarah's desire to create a musically inspired, design-led, soulful retreat with the inherent essence of Bali at its core. It proves to be the perfect tonic after a multi-day bike ride. Twice daily yoga sessions help ease muscular tension as I stretch and pose amidst a lush tropical scented garden. Later, an hour-long deep-heat Herbal Poultice massage, with its origins seated in 14th century healing, sends me into a blissful meditative state before the masseuse gently awakens me.

Franti's lyrics from Out in the Sun romp around my head as I slip into the plunge pool of my David Bowie-themed villa. "Hey, I'll send my soul on holiday... I could use a little fun... I think I found my little place in the sun." **A**

The writer was a guest of Spice Roads Cycling and Soulshine Bali. Spice Roads [www.spiceroads.com](http://www.spiceroads.com) Soulshine Bali [www.soulshinebali.com](http://www.soulshinebali.com)